Experiences With Cultural Capital in Education: Exploring the Educational Life Stories of First-Generation Postsecondary Students

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Abstract

This study used a life history research design to explore first-generation university students' educational life stories and experiences with cultural capital. The project sought to examine how 3 first-generation university students experience cultural capital that is privileged in Ontario's education system and how the interactions between capital acquired through experiences within the home and school and capital privileged by the education system affect these students' educational experiences and perceptions. Using Pierre Bourdieu's (1984; 1986) theory of cultural capital as a framework, 3 first-generation, first-year university students participated in two 1- to 2-hour interviews. A focus on each participant's experiences with culture, capital, and education revealed themes corresponding to navigating, utilizing, and confronting familial, institutional, economic, and embodied forms of cultural capital. The study highlights the importance of recognizing how cultural capital influences the education system and how first-generation students can recreate normative pathways and achieve academic success despite challenges posed by the cultural capital privileged within the education system. Given cultural capital's effect on academic success, understanding first-generation students' educational life stories sheds light on the complex challenges facing students who confront and deal with privileged culture in the education system.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In this research, I analyze educational life stories to explore how first-generation students (those who are the first in their immediate families to attend university) experience cultural capital (i.e., valued representations of culture) in the education system. To frame the context for this research, I first contextualize my lived experiences as both a student and a researcher by presenting my educational life story as a backdrop to focus on educational experiences, cultural capital, and life stories.

My Educational Life Story

I was raised in a financially stable, White, nuclear family that included my mother and father, older brother, and younger sister. Born in Dunnville, Ontario, I spent the first 5 years of my life living in a small country home surrounded by many acres of field and forest. As first-generation college graduates, both of my parents had jobs within a 20-minute commute of our home. My grandmother took care of my brother and I until my sister was born, at which point my mother stopped working to spend more time with me and my siblings. I did not attend junior kindergarten and instead began school at age 5, when I attended a Catholic elementary school for 6 months. In January of my first year of school, we moved to British Columbia so that my father could seize a promising career opportunity. This move proved to be economically worthwhile as it led him to a long and successful career in the corporate division of a high-profile construction and agriculture equipment company.

Because British Columbia did not have a fully funded Catholic school board, I attended a public elementary school within walking distance of my home. This school experience was most enjoyable because we lived close to the school and to my

classmates. The parents within my neighbourhood often left their front doors unlocked and it was not uncommon to walk into a neighbour's home without waiting for them to answer the door. The school had a gym (which my elementary school in Ontario did not have), large classrooms with "play spaces," a new playground, a large field with areas of hills and forest and, most importantly, a caring educational staff. Along with the resources that the school offered, parents also paid a fee of approximately $50 at the beginning of every year so that all students had the same amount and quality of school supplies; this fee covered the cost of materials such as workbooks, pencil crayons, and musical instruments. The school had an open-door policy to encourage parental involvement in classrooms. My mother participated in many of my class trips as she worked from home in order to take care of my younger sister. Because we were far away from my extended family, it was not uncommon for my grandmother and grandfather to travel to British Columbia for months at a time or for my family to spend summers in a recreational vehicle traveling to Ontario.

As part of a promotion, my father was transferred back to Ontario before the Christmas break of my grade 4 year. I was excited to move into a larger house but was surprised to see that the houses were very close together, with little yard space and few children living nearby. While I was happy to be able to see my extended family more, I was saddened to leave my friends and neighbours and I was even more upset after I had a terrible first day of school at my new Catholic elementary school. The school that I attended had limited access to the playground, a small field, large class sizes, and small classrooms. In addition to the general layout of the school, the change in curriculum also was frustrating as my peers had taken French since grade 1 and I had never studied the

language; I thus was encouraged to just "follow along" instead of learning the material. In addition to not fitting in academically, I was bullied on a daily basis for my clothing, glasses, braces, and accent (although I did not think that my spoken voice was different, girls in the class claimed that my vowel pronunciation was strange). Furthermore, my sister began elementary school and so my mother took a secretarial position at the University of Guelph, which lessened her direct involvement with the school in comparison to previous years. To ease the transition to school in Ontario, my parents often voiced any concerns directly to my teachers but ultimately the teachers felt that they could not control the actions of my peers. Wanting desperately to fit in socially, I convinced my mother that I needed a professional haircut (which resulted in more than six inches of hair being cut) and a shirt that had Gap written on the front (as this is what the girls wore at school). Although my request required economic investment, my mother agreed to do what I suggested so that I could fit in. I was allowed to hang out with the girls in my grade as long as I continued to wear fashionable clothing and joined them when they made fun of anyone whose style fell outside the norm.

Eventually, my father found that his commute was too long and that he needed to be closer to his office so that he could spend more time with our family. I was relieved to find out that were moving to Vineland, Ontario, but made my father promise that this was the last time we would ever move. My father turned down subsequent promotions to keep his promise and my final move was to my current home, which is in a small neighbourhood with large houses, where most homeowners hold professional designations or own businesses. Continuing my education within the Catholic school board, I attended a small, rural elementary school. While the school did not have the

same resources as my school in British Columbia, the community was incredibly welcoming and I instantly made friends and felt supported by my teachers. After grade 8, I attended high school in nearby Grimsby with some of my friends from elementary school. My mother became a secretary at my high school, which increased her involvement in my academic life, and my brother became one of the most popular boys in grade 12, which gave me a good reputation before I even started school. The teachers and senior students had high expectations academically and socially that I strived to meet. While I felt that I was not as socially popular as my brother, I was able to meet teachers' expectations academically because of their support and ongoing feedback. Furthermore, my mother was always aware of any teachers' concerns because of her daily contact with them and she encouraged me to become friends with people who had good reputations.

The teachers' expectations for me were always reinforced at home, and their regular dialogue with my mother made her well aware of my strengths and weaknesses as a student. In my teachers' view, I co-operated well with others, was very creative, and was a strong reader. At almost every parent–teacher interview, my parents were informed that I was often "too social", did not work well independently, always had a messy desk, and needed to improve in math and spelling. My mother agreed that these areas needed improvement and encouraged me to work on my weaknesses in my spare time at home. Through teacher feedback and the way such feedback was reinforced at home, I learned what was needed in order to become academically successful. Because my parents emphasized the importance of school activities and maintained regular communication with my teachers, they encouraged me to meet the school's expectations. In order to become an exceptional student, I was encouraged to maintain high grades,

become involved in extracurricular activities, never challenge the teachers' opinions, wear conservative yet fashionable clothing, and make friends with people who were well liked by the school's administrators.

My academic success and desire to stay in a community where I felt I belonged led me to postsecondary education at Brock University, where I have now been for the past 7 years. Learning to conform to expectations eventually paid off, as I easily fit into the dominant culture upon entering the university system. With my parents both having completed 2 years of college and with my older brother in his third year at university, I had a good idea of what my first year of university would entail. My parents thought that it was important for me to live on campus during my first year of university so that I could make friends and learn how to live on my own. My parents helped me deal with most financial needs, administrative details, and general knowledge of my university's programs and facilities—and with the use of a family vehicle, I was able to visit home very often. After an academically and socially successful first year of university, I became a Residence Advisor and helped first-year students make their own transitions to university, and I began to rely less on my parents' support. From my assigned group of 75 students, 20 became a close group of friends who were actively involved in residence events and who encouraged others to participate. While this group of 20 students represented the dominant culture of the residence, some students rarely participated in any social events within the university or residence and approached me with concerns of completing the year. The students' concerns were often grounded in their belief that they did not "fit in" either academically or socially. Some felt that they were not ready to leave their hometowns while others had not expected university life to be so academically

difficult or socially busy. At the time, I thought the students simply needed to learn how to fit in to enjoy their educational experiences, because my own perceptions, thoughts, beliefs, and behaviours always had been moulded to fit the expectations in any social context.

After completing my 4-year honours degree, I decided to continue my education with a Master of Education program. Because no one in my family had any experience with graduate education, for the first time I had to navigate the university system on my own while supporting myself in the same ways that my parents had done. I felt overwhelmed by expectations and found myself spending more time managing my finances and figuring out administrative details than completing my readings. I was unsure if the path I chose was the so-called right one and I doubted whether or not I fit in to the program. After completing the first year of my MEd program, I became interested in how dominant culture is reproduced in the education system and how students react when their culture does not "fit" with the culture that the Canadian education system promotes. As I later discovered, what I was really interested in was how some students experience different forms of cultural capital that are privileged within education systems.

Framing the Language of Cultural Capital

Through my educational experiences, I found that fitting into the school's social and academic climate often meant recognizing and conforming to the norms (i.e., expectations) of the given context. Because social and cultural norms can vary depending on time and meaning (Bourdieu, 1984), the capital associated with culture is dependent on context and interpretation. Cultural capital therefore can be defined as

specific representations of culture that are valued by a group of people within a particular context and can be used to promote or inhibit social mobility within the group. Because culture can be represented in a number of ways, cultural capital may constitute an embodied state (long-lasting dispositions), an objectified state (cultural goods), or an institutionalized state (academic qualifications; Bourdieu, 1986). My unwillingness to verbally challenge my teachers is an example of embodied cultural capital in the context of my educational experiences; by conducting myself in a way that maintained teacher–student power relations, I developed a positive relationship with my teachers. Objectified cultural capital is exemplified by my school's resources (or lack of), such as the musical instruments that enhanced my enjoyment of music classes. Finally, institutional cultural capital is illustrated by my French-education experience; because I did not have any previous French education in British Columbia, I had different institutional capital that put me at an academic disadvantage when I transferred to a school in Ontario.

While Bourdieu outlines embodied, objectified, and institutional forms of cultural capital, other forms of capital that often intersect with cultural capital include social capital (networks), economic capital (finances), and familial capital (family connections and support). Social capital is not only a form of capital within itself but also a means to utilize and promote forms of cultural capital. An example of social capital is my mother's work relationship with my teachers. Because she had a strong social network within my high school, I was aware of the dispositions that were preferred by teachers and I therefore became a "likeable" student. Economic capital specifically represents one's financial situation. Economic capital was an important part of my educational experience in British Columbia because the school required an additional $50 fee for

resources upon registration, which my parents were able to pay. Finally, familial capital is the additional support that families offer. In addition to having strong social capital because of my mother, I also had strong familial capital because of the support that my grandmother offered throughout my life. In having the familial capital provided by my grandmother, both of my parents were able to have jobs that gave them access to social and economic capital, which influenced where we lived and how we accumulated privileged forms of cultural capital. Furthermore, my parents' and brother's experience in postsecondary education helped ease my own transition to a postsecondary institution, as they provided me with familial capital through their knowledge and support.

Because cultural capital highlights how forms of culture are privileged in particular contexts, it also highlights what is socially valuable and it therefore influences social class. Social class can be defined as an individuals position in society's hierarchy based on his or her possession of the cultural capital valued by the dominant class (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000). The social class position that one holds in society relies on cultural capital; more so than economic status, it is dependent on class and thus on all forms of privileged capital within the wider social context. For example, in a social field that privileges the attainment of postsecondary education, those who have this form of institutional cultural capital may be in a higher class position than persons who do not have the same educational qualifications. Because the education system is not separate from society, capital that is privileged in society is often privileged in education as well (Bourdieu, 1984). In dominant western society, the culture that is most privileged is represented most often by rich, White, heterosexual, able-bodied men (hooks, 2000), thereby placing those who do not fit this representation into marginalized class positions.

Furthermore, the capital that is associated with education can be used to "improve or maintain [individuals'] position in the class structure" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 125).

Background of the Problem

Education systems have a number of direct and indirect purposes. Transmitting knowledge and providing opportunities for social mobility is often considered a predominant direct purpose of education systems (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000). Indirectly, however, education systems transmit more than knowledge and they also can promote dominant forms of culture to socialize students in ways that are thought to best meet the demands of society (Davies & Guppy, 2006). Culture is not limited to heritage or ethnicity but can be defined generally as "the ways of perceiving, thinking, believing, and behaving that characterize the members of a particular social group" (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2000, p. 4). By promoting particular forms of culture, the education system has the ability to "allocate people to particular statuses and provide a socially recognized rationale for such allocation" (Davies & Guppy, 2006, p. 200). Social status (or social class position) is influenced by the organizing effects of education and supported by how well a student's cultural capital aligns with the cultural capital that is promoted in the school.

Education is not politically neutral, as the social hierarchies that structure society are played out and reinforced within the education system (Bourdieu, 1984; hooks, 1994; Kincheloe, 2004). As a result of social hierarchies, students who do not exhibit the cultural capital that is privileged by the education system may see their culture as marginal and may question their sense of self and belonging (Gonzalez, 2001). As noted during my education experience at Brock University when I had advised students in

residence, the success of students can depend on how comfortable they are within the environment. If students do not feel that they belong, they may "give up on school because of low self-esteem" (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010, p. 106). In addition to academic achievement, student identity and self-worth also affect how class position and cultural capital are recognized and how class divides are perpetuated within the education system.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that schools are sites for cultural reproduction that, by privileging dominant culture, promote particular forms of cultural capital. An individual's disposition, material goods, and educational attainment contribute to her/his cultural capital. Because particular forms of cultural capital are valued according to what dominant society dictates, only certain representations of culture are used to promote or inhibit social mobility and economic success. For example, by maintaining privileged dispositions or embodied cultural capital, along with the social capital provided by my mother working at my high school, I was able to establish positive relationships with my high school teachers and I thus benefited academically.

Without recognizing cultural differences within schools, teachers run the risk of becoming gatekeepers as they may unknowingly create academic expectations that align with the values and culture privileged by the dominant society (Monkman, Ronald, & Théraméne, 2005). If a student's cultural capital aligns with that which is privileged in schools and by teachers, he or she often has easier access to educational material and is thus more likely to be academically successful (Monkman et al., 2005). However, if the cultural capital promoted at home is different than that promoted at school, the student may be at an educational disadvantage as he or she may disengage from taught material

and experience feelings of inferiority (Reay, 2005; Sullivan, 2001). More than just academic achievement, student identity and self-worth can also be implicated in how class position and cultural capital are recognized and how class divides are perpetuated within the education system. Schools, therefore, do not necessarily offer the same access to education and thus do not offer the same means for upward social mobility to all students, because practices and expectations are catered to the dominant culture (Adnett & Slack, 2007).

Framing the Context for Research With First-Generation Students

Students who are the first in their family to attend university or college are identified as first-generation students and often face challenges when navigating through the culture and expectations of the education system (Jehangir, 2010; Lehmann, 2007; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007). With the education system catering to the dominant culture by promoting specific forms of cultural capital, the level of parental institutional cultural capital can be a "determinant of educational and occupational expectations and attainment" (Lehmann, 2007, p. 90). The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario has found "that access appears to be much more strongly related to parental education and other 'sociocultural' factors than to family income and other financial factors" (as cited in Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2011, p. 3).

Intergenerational class reproduction is influenced by family income and can also be affected by how well a first-generation student can negotiate cultural, social, and academic transitions when entering postsecondary education (Gofen, 2009; Lehmann, 2007; Stieha, 2010; Swartz, 2008). Students whose parents have not attended postsecondary institutions may find the environment more intimidating and less familiar

than students whose parents have attended postsecondary institutions (Lehmann, 2007). While families can help to ease first-generation students' transitions to postsecondary institutions by utilizing various forms of capital, in general many first-generation students are at an academic disadvantage when compared to non first-generation students (Gofen, 2009; Lehmann, 2007; Stieha, 2010; Swartz, 2008).

Framing the Context for Research in Ontario

Government efforts in Ontario are attempting to rectify inequalities within the education system to improve student success through the implementation of an Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). This strategy has been formed in response to the "changing face of Ontario" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 10) highlighting Ontario's diversity in relation to language, aboriginal peoples, lone-parent families, same-sex couples, newcomers, visible minorities, and religion. Through this strategy, the Ontario Ministry of Education recognizes the link between sociocultural inclusion and educational achievement and the importance of addressing marginalization within the education system. While this policy encourages accommodating students from various cultural backgrounds within schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009), it does not look critically at how cultural capital influences power structures within the education system. Furthermore, Ontario universities have implemented programs to promote student involvement in an effort to ease transitions to postsecondary institutions for first-generation students (Stieha, 2010). Often, programs that promote involvement assume that "social integration is desirable, regardless of student background" (Stieha, 2010, p. 247), which is problematic when considering that social background plays "an important role in how students experience

university and ultimately how they form dispositions to either persist or drop out" (Lehmann, 2007, p. 105). For example, I strived as a residence advisor to include all students in order to build a strong sense of community through programming but not all students felt that they belonged. To reach the most students possible, I often catered to the majority of students and thus the residence's dominant culture when organizing programs. To promote student learning and engagement, it is important to maintain students' cultural background rather than encourage them to conform to the dominant culture of the school (Jehangir, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

This research examines the educational life stories of first-generation postsecondary students (those who are the first in their immediate families to attend university) in order to understand their experiences with cultural capital within the education system. With recent international economic instability, many youth have needed to extend their education and have relied more on their parents for support than previous generations (Swartz, 2008). With longer educational paths, postsecondary education has become an important means to attain financial ends. Because certain forms of cultural capital are privileged within educational practices and curriculum, young people from higher social class positions have disproportionately benefited (Adnett & Slack, 2007; Gofen, 2009; Swartz, 2008). Cultural capital promoted in the education system therefore strengthens privileged social classes and marginalizes students from less-advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. In order to promote social justice in Canadian society, it is important to reveal how cultural privileging is implicated in the experiences of students who do not inherit privileged cultural capital from their families.

Purpose of the Study

Given cultural capital's potential effect on academic success, understanding educational experiences through students' perspectives may offer insight and reveal how cultural privileging is dealt with on an individual basis and how cultural capital has manifested itself in a number of different experiences over time. The purpose of this study is to examine how some first-generation students experience certain forms of cultural capital that are privileged in Ontario's education system (as a social institution) and how interactions between capital that is possessed and capital that is privileged affect these students' educational experiences and perceptions (Gofen, 2009; hooks, 1994; Scatamburlo-D'Annibale & McLaren, 2004; Stieha, 2009).

Research Questions

Because the forms of cultural capital are privileged in different social fields, this study seeks to address the following central questions: How (if at all) do some first-generation university students experience certain forms of cultural capital promoted within the education system and what are the wider implications for first- generation students and society? To thoroughly examine the experiences of some first-generation students, I will explore the following subquestions:

1. What forms of cultural capital do 3 first-generation university students see as being promoted in the Ontario education system?
2. How do these 3 first-generation university students understand their own cultural capital?
3. How do these first-generation university students respond to the forms and ways that cultural capital is represented in the Ontario education system?

4. How do these first-generation university students understand who they are and where they belong socially when interacting with the forms of cultural capital that are promoted in the Ontario education system?

Rationale

The basis for my research is largely inspired by Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, which argues that social inequalities are perpetuated by the education system. While Bourdieu's (1984, 1986) theories concerning cultural capital were written in the mid-1980s, they are still prevalent in current educational research and are used as a theoretical base in most educational research (e.g., Jaeger, 2009; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Zimdars, Sullivan, & Heath, 2009). Even today, the education system can "perpetuate or challenge the norms that relegate nonmainstream populations" (Monkman et al., 2005, p. 30). As a result, educators

> should actively, consciously, and critically develop philosophies that will guide practices that are more likely to upset the status quo and begin to see their roles as including social processes such as increasing children's access to and development of social and cultural capital and actively redefining what counts. (Monkman et al., 2005, p. 30)

Unfortunately, educators assert power and authority (often unknowingly) through practices and pedagogies that have not been critically examined. For example, banking methods include educational practices that promote transferring knowledge in a linear path from the teacher to the student, placing the teacher in a position of authority and the student in a position of subordination (Freire, 1993).

Bourdieu (1986) has offered a rationale to explain how power infiltrates the education system, how divides between classes form, and how schools connect to the wider society; he argues that education systems are influenced by and influence wider society. Unacknowledged silencing and oppression are just some of the dangers associated with the presumption that education is free of power, as "the curriculum is never simply a neutral assemblage of knowledge somehow appearing in the texts and classrooms of a nation" (Apple, 1996, p. 22), and because schools and curriculum promote "specific notions of knowledge and power" (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004, p. 24). Students must typically assimilate to act in a similar fashion as the privileged class if they wish to be successful (hooks, 1994; Jetten, Iyer, Tsivrikos, & Young, 2008). I primarily seek to understand the students who, despite marginalization, have worked within the education system to become academically successful (in that they are continuing to postsecondary education). By listening to students' experiences within the education system, I intend to gain a deeper understanding of how these students recognize and experience cultural capital, and how the schools and educators within their experience have promoted or discouraged certain forms of cultural capital. By understanding these first-generation university students' various experiences dealing with cultural capital, I will be able to explore some of the ways that the education system indirectly maintains cultural norms. By analyzing students' experiences at home and at school, educators may be given a unique insight into the lives of students.

While some researchers have attempted to make a direct link between cultural capital and educational achievement (e.g., Kingston, 2001) or explored the tensions between one's home life and school life (e.g., Gonzalez, 2001; hooks, 2000), more work

is needed in order to examine how first-generation university students understand how cultural capital is embedded within the education system. Furthermore, studies attempt to identify a direct relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement (e.g., Dumais, 2001; Kingston, 2001; Sullivan, 2001) without exploring how students have constructed meanings from their experiences. While some research explores how first-generation students interact with cultural capital within their homes and schools, (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Jehangir, 2010) these studies do not use life-history research to explore the unique lived experiences of first-generation students. One way understand the complexity of cultural capital, is to look also at the issue from the perspective of individual students through their educational life stories.

Exploring students' educational life stories may help educators and administrators understand how students experience the culture that is promoted by the education system. First-generation programs have been developed at universities to assist first-generation students' transitions by offering resources such as counselling, mentorship programs, and social activities. First-generation program developers may gain a deeper understanding of the educational and social complexities first-generation students face when entering postsecondary environments, which may help to improve programs intended to offer assistance. In addition, those who work within the education system may gain insight into how particular forms of culture are valued and reproduced through education.

Overview of the Study

This chapter presented my own educational life story to articulate my own positionality as a researcher and introduced first-generation students' experiences with cultural capital as the focus for this research. The introduction provided background and

contextual information highlighting the current issues that educational institutions and students (most notably first-generation students) face as a result of the privileging of certain types of cultural capital. The chapter identified the problem as well as the study's research questions and rationale.

Chapter 2 reviews existing literature that further contextualizes and defines my research problem. In order to do so, I define cultural capital; provide an overview of Bourdieu as the predominant theorist framing my research; outline modern interpretations of cultural capital; and explain the relationship between cultural capital, education, and home life. After providing a conceptual understanding of the theories that ground my research, I discuss the implications of interactions between cultural capital, education, and home life on first-generation students and how issues of class intersect with race and gender.

Chapter 3 discusses my methodology, specifically the background, use, and process of life history research with a focus on educational life stories. The chapter also addresses ethics, specific steps undertaken throughout the research process, and the limitations of the study.

Chapter 4 presents the data that have been collected as well as an analysis of the findings. I present each participant's educational life story and then discuss the themes I identified across participants. The themes focus on familial capital, institutional capital, economic capital, social capital, embodied capital, and represented cultural capital.

Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the analysis including implications of the research and suggestions for future research. This chapter discusses how the research questions were answered by connecting the findings to the literature. Chapter 5

concludes with a discussion focusing on the importance of researching cultural capital in the education system as well as the importance of researching first-generation students.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to set up a theoretical foundation that will frame my research. This chapter will draw on literature to explain and contextualize how cultural capital can be defined and represented, how forms of capital are represented in the education system, how the home and the education system interact, how first-generation students' interact with privileged culture, how students can be affected by cultural reproduction, and finally how social class and other forms of marginalization interact.

Education is often considered a means to increase one's own capital that will either promote upward class mobility or maintain higher social class position (Bourdieu, 1984). Education as cultural capital can also improve one's social conditions and individual status (Jetten et al., 2008). This idea of education as an opportunity for achievement in order to advance in society is supported by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2010), as its educational priorities are "high levels of student achievement" (para. 1), "reduced gaps in student achievement" (para. 1), and "increased public confidence in publicly funded education" (para. 1). Through these priorities, the Ontario Ministry of Education seeks to ensure that all students have equal access to public education and therefore equal access to the cultural capital that higher education represents. While these priorities have inspired programs and policies—such as *Reach Every Student* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008) and *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009)—that were created to alleviate some of the struggles facing students from diverse backgrounds, tensions arise when one

begins to look beyond the surface of academic achievement into the deeper cultural context of education.

Education is not culturally neutral and can be considered an institution that reproduces and represents cultural competence (Bourdieu, 1986). For Bourdieu (1986), cultural competency encompasses students' knowledge and acquisition of cultural practices that are privileged in dominant society. Educational institutions therefore do not offer equal opportunity based purely on academic merit, but instead privilege those who identify with the dominant culture while marginalizing and even excluding those who identify with nondominant cultures (Fukuyama, 2001; Kingston, 2001; Lin, 2000; Yosso, 2005). As a result of privileging dominant cultures, education systems can maintain and perpetuate social reproduction that can negatively influence student identity and inhibit educational success rates (Bourdieu, 1984; Jaeger, 2009; Reay, 2005).

Defining Cultural Capital

From an economic and sociological perspective, capital can be defined as "investment of resources with expected returns in the marketplace" (Lin, 2001, p. 3). While capital was originally understood in the Marxist sense of commodity production and exchange (Lin, 2001), it has since taken on a variety of different forms including but not limited to social and cultural capital. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital examines how culture is valued, produced, and reproduced in society and education (Jaeger, 2009; Kingston, 2001; Stampnitzky, 2006). To understand the tensions between the education system and social class position, one must not examine merely the volume and composition of capital, but also the structure of the system and how the system determines what capital has value (Bourdieu, 1984). To best understand how capital is

produced, one must first define cultural capital, how cultural capital operates, and how Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital can be applied in a modern context.

Foundational Theorist: Bourdieu

Bourdieu (1986) states that "it is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory" (p. 46). Drawing on traditional economic theories surrounding capital, Bourdieu recognizes that it is not one's economic capital alone that accounts for social class position; in addition to financial capital, valued forms of culture and social relationships can be capitalized. Society functions in accordance with norms determined through human interactions influenced by definitions of what capital is and is not accepted. To act in a manner that is most accepted and encouraged can often guarantee positive reactions and therefore a form of return. For example, as with my own educational experience, a student may be expected to refrain from challenging teachers' views that are expressed in the classroom. If a student openly disagrees with the view that is expressed, he or she may be viewed as a challenging student. Alternately, a student who complies with accepted behaviour within the classroom by not openly disagreeing with the teacher may instead express similar views in an opinion-based writing assignment. As a result, the latter student may receive praise from the teacher and even receive a high mark on the assignment, thereby gaining a return on the culture that he or she has performed, to use Bourdieu's terminology.

Cultural capital therefore can be defined as the aspects of culture, such as family background, traditions, education, attitudes, behaviour, and taste that are privileged in society and typically help achieve economic success. Cultural capital can present itself in

an "embodied state" (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body), an "objectified state" (cultural goods such as pictures, books, instruments), and an "institutionalized state" (academic qualifications; Bourdieu, 1986, p. 47). Determined by the value that society attributes to it, cultural capital can be promoted by social capital, which is the network of social connections that one has developed through socially organized groups. Capital is not simply dependent on financial position but also ascribes value to particular representations of culture. Culture that is privileged in a society and thus represents a valued form of cultural capital becomes socially legitimized norms and expectations (Apple, 1996). The norms and expectations that determine forms of capital are most accessible by those who are familiar with the form of capital.

Bourdieu (1984) uses the term *habitus* to explain how social structure regulates access to privileged forms of cultural capital. Habitus is considered to be "not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices but also a structured structure" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 170). Habitus works to structure the social world while it is also structured by the social world. In regards to sociology, actions, perceptions, and experience shape how an individual understands and chooses to interact and thus determine the lifestyle that he or she may choose to enact. In other words, habitus is how capital is internalized to the point where it becomes a part of who one is and as a result is expressed subconsciously (Holt, 2008). Habitus determines the value that one allocates to certain forms of culture and can influence how an individual acts within particular social fields (Holt, 2008).

To understand how cultural capital and habitus operate together, it is necessary to understand the field (or social space) within which culture and capital operate. The field,

as used by Bourdieu (1984), can best be described as the context or symbolic space within which culture is developed, takes place, and structures social practice. Fields do not exist in isolation but rather are embedded within wider contexts and are governed by power structures (Bourdieu, 1993). For example, Bourdieu (1993) explains that the education system can be considered a field where the cultural practice of learning takes place. The education system as a field is governed by power structures embodied as teachers and administrators who enforce what are considered to be acceptable learning processes. The field of power that contains the educational field is further governed by the wider field of class relations. The learning processes or cultural practices that take place within the educational field are managed and controlled by larger fields that hold and encourage dominant forms of cultural practice. Education institutions therefore do not exist in isolation; instead, the values that they encourage are those that are encouraged by wider power structures. What is viewed as acceptable behaviour in schools is not created solely by the school itself, but is influenced by the values promoted within the education institution as well as within wider society. Students who align with what is deemed acceptable by the wider society are often more successful in the field in which they are operating. As a result, the larger fields that encompass the smaller fields work to maintain norms and reproduce dominant culture (Bourdieu, 1993). Furthermore, while Bourdieu's theory of field demonstrates how the education system is influenced by society, it also shows how complicated it can be to change the values that are held within the education system, as such values do not exist in isolation.

Combining definitions of capital, habitus, and field in order to understand how forms of capital work within social spaces, Bourdieu (1984) developed the equation

"[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice" (p. 101). Through this formula, the practices in which individuals, communities, and institutions engage on a daily basis can be accounted for by their underlying conditions. Habitus, or how one interprets and understands the world, combined with capital (or valued material) within a field or symbolic space creates the practices that society performs. It is therefore significant to recognize that individuals and institutions that classify particular forms of capital as more valuable than others, in fields that further encourage and promote the valuing of these norms, affect how individuals and institutions reproduce and privilege particular forms of being through practices that are normalized. For example, a student who "naturally" values cultural activities such as reading (habitus) combined with access to books (capital) within a university institution (field) may prove to be a very successful student when reading is a core component of a course (practice). Cultural and social capital therefore can influence the student's success while universities reproduce social norms by privileging certain forms of capital.

Modern Applications of Cultural Capital Theory

Social capital and cultural capital work together; "cultural capital can be thought of as the substance that is transmitted via the social ties that are enacted in social capital" (Monkman et al., 2005, p. 26). While cultural capital can determine an individual's success within social institutions, social capital can determine how this success is used to create social groups. Social capital allows individuals to utilize and share their cultural capital to improve social class position through relationships to groups of people (Bourdieu, 1986). Coleman (1988), like Bourdieu, recognizes the complexities and impact of intangible forms of capital. Social capital is tied closely to how social relationships ease access to resources that can help achieve particular interests. Social

capital is best facilitated through norms as they support and reward action that maintains social structure (Coleman, 1988). For example, if a group of girls privilege wearing name brand clothing (objectified cultural capital), the clothing itself asserts capital because it encourages social connections with the group. Wearing name brand clothing not only encourages social acceptance and therefore social relationships, but also reinforces what is privileged within the group.

More recently, Fukuyama (2001) defines social capital as "an instantiated informal norm that promotes co-operation between two or more individuals" (p. 7). Extending Coleman's (1988) definition of social capital, Fukuyama recognizes that all forms of culture partake in shared norms that are used to maintain society's structure. Many social capital theorists focus predominantly on the positive effects social capital can have on community building (Coleman, 1988; Kilpatrick, Field, & Falk, 2003; Laser & Leibowitz, 2009); however, it is also important to recognize that "many groups achieve internal cohesion at the expense of outsiders, who can be treated with suspicion, hostility and outright hatred" (Fukuyama, 2001, p. 8). Furthermore, through an increased cohesive identity, homophily is promoted as norms within the group only include individuals who share "similar group or even socio-economic characteristics" (Lin, 2000, p. 786). Divides between groups are strengthened as the diversity within a group is reduced and the collective identity is maintained by excluding those who do not fit the norms promoted by the group (Lin, 2000). For example, if my family could not afford to buy the name brand clothes that the girls in my elementary school wore, I likely would not have been accepted into the group and would have continued to be an outsider. The group determines its membership by what its members have and what

outsiders do not in order to define what is and is not acceptable. In identifying what constitutes "other," group members gain a clearer sense of who belongs, thus increasing social cohesion.

Class divides and homophily (group solidarity) restrict access to social and cultural capital, leading to certain groups becoming deficient in privileged forms of capital (Fukuyama, 2001; Lin, 2000). It is therefore important that negative implications are acknowledged when discussing the benefits of social capital. Fukuyama (2001) uses the example of the United States Marines to express the effectiveness of social capital. For the Marines, it is crucial to maximize internal trust to socialize the members into the values of their particular profession. In maximizing internal trust, a divide is created between the Marines and those on the outside, therefore excluding other members of society but strengthening the bond to increase effectiveness, such as Marines' co-operation on missions (Fukuyama, 2001). Similar to the students I advised in residence, the more the dominant group of students bonded and created their own set of group values, the more the students who did not "fit" were marginalized, thus strengthening their desire to leave. While homophily may have immediate practical benefits, crossing group boundaries to either join or leave a group can be difficult. A person's ability to join the Marines or the dominant group in residence would depend on how well he or she fit the promoted norms. To fit the norms, a person may feel the need to change or conceal parts of his or her identity in order to participate with the group. In the wider social context, social divides determine how privilege is allocated and may result in broader social inequalities that directly affect a person's identity.

While social capital can be used to gain cohesion within groups through maintaining norms, it is important to extend theories of social and cultural capital to understand how particular groups are marginalized through normalizing practices that are associated with the dominant culture. In challenging traditional interpretations of cultural capital as it is defined by Bourdieu, Yosso (2005) argues that certain forms of cultural capital are recognized while others are left unrecognized. Traditional theorists propose that students who lack cultural capital do not do well in school, thereby assuming that students from diverse backgrounds have "cultural deficiencies" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Through these assumptions, interpretations of Bourdieu attempt to assert that some communities are culturally wealthy while other communities are culturally poor, therefore widening the gap between dominant and marginalized communities (Yosso, 2005). One must recognize that students are not culturally deficient; rather, the cultural community wealth with which they identify is generated by different forms of capital that do not always match the capital that produces cultural community wealth in dominant society.

Using a critical race theory lens, Yosso (2005) compiles the work of many other critical race theorists to create a capital theory that relates to the wealth of communities of colour, in an effort to decentre White, middle class-focused cultural capital theory. In doing so, Yosso recognizes that the cultural wealth of communities includes different forms of cultural capital along with aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital (referring to instrumental and emotional support), navigational capital (within social institutions), and resistant capital. Cultural capital is not a form of wealth that individuals from cultural communities either have or do not have; instead, it is

something that every community has, though each in a different way. Through privileging dominant forms of capital, alternate forms of culture are marginalized as the practices that they engage in are not rewarded by institutions.

Interactions Between Educational Institutions and Cultural Capital

Many researchers have examined the relationship between educational systems and cultural and social capital, specifically outlining how the educational system privileges particular forms of capital (Adamuti-Trache & Andres, 2008; Bourdieu, 1984; hooks, 1994; Jaeger, 2009, Print & Coleman, 2003; Sullivan, 2001). As a result of how power structures privilege certain cultural practices, the education system becomes a field that reproduces culture and perpetuates privilege for those who identify with the norm (Bourdieu, 1993). Culture can be reproduced by privileging specific forms of cultural capital and isolating students who do not identify with the capital that is promoted.

The education system often influences academic success by rewarding students who acquire privileged forms of cultural capital (Dumais, 2001). Because curriculum is influenced by culture, students may be rewarded on assignments for demonstrating a rich vocabulary and cultural knowledge that they are likely to have acquired through various home and extracurricular experiences (Sullivan, 2001). By demonstrating preferential treatment of students who better understand hidden expectations that are acquired outside the formal education system, privilege is associated with the students' engagement with particular (and often dominant) forms of cultural capital (Jaeger, 2009).

Analysing longitudinal data from the Danish Programme for International Student Assessment 2000 and 2004 surveys, Jaeger (2009) finds that "children with high levels of cultural capital and academic ability are particularly likely to prefer 'cultural capital

heavy' academic secondary education over 'cultural capital light' vocational secondary education" (p. 1965). Students believed that academic pathways ("cultural capital heavy" university) would allow them to accumulate privileged forms of cultural capital that would increase their social class position. Alternately, students did not believe that vocational pathways ("cultural capital light" college) would offer the same amount of cultural capital nor improve their social class position as extensively as the academic pathway. Surveying 465 students in their final year of compulsory schooling, Sullivan (2001) supports Jaeger's findings with her conclusion that although higher class families ensure educational advantage through cultural capital, access to material resources and support for educational aspirations also account for differentials in educational attainment. Students tend to choose academic paths that encourage forms of capital with which they are most comfortable. While Yosso (2005) would take issue with defining culture as something that one has or does not have, and Lareau and Weininger (2003) would take issue with assuming that cultural capital is aligned with "high culture," it is nonetheless important to recognize that students may make academic choices based on their personal comfort level with the cultural capital that is promoted within the academic strands. If a student's culture is not valued in the education system, he or she may lose confidence pursuing certain educational paths (Lehmann, 2007; Sullivan, 2001).

While there is not necessarily one form of cultural capital that individuals either have or do not have, educators often unknowingly privilege mainstream over minority cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) and as a result can act as gatekeepers for student success (Monkman et al., 2005). Academic success often requires students to understand and conform to privileged forms of cultural capital (Apple, 2000; Bourdieu, 1984). In

privileging dominant cultural capital, students who relate to non-White, non-middle class cultural capital are not adequately represented within the institution and often feel excluded (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Monkman et al., 2005). Furthermore, Nora (2004) studied a sample of first-year students at 3 southwestern American universities and found that students often made their academic choices based on how they fit in socially and culturally (p. 203). A student's cultural capital and therefore access to academic rewards can depend on the cultural capital that is passed down through the family and can be further dependent on the social class position that the family holds (Dumais, 2001; Lehmann, 2007; Swartz, 2008). If academic rewards are tied to the cultural capital that the family promotes, cultural privileging will only continue to be perpetuated as education is more easily accessed by those who represent and maintain privileged norms (Swartz, 2008).

In addition to being exclusionary, class-based assumptions and social divides will continue to encourage conformity and may create conflicts between a student's identity and his or her family if cultural privileging is not challenged. A student's confidence in his or her ability may be influenced by teachers as well as the ways that stereotypes corresponding to social class position are recognized and accepted in the education system. For example, Désert, Préaux, and Jund (2009) conducted research to understand how students evaluate their own performance as well as their "beliefs regarding the average scholastic level of children of low and high SES [socio-economic status]" (p. 211). One-hundred and fifty three children in either grade 1 or 3 were given a series of evaluative standardized problem-solving tests as well as a survey that asked questions regarding academic achievement and socio-economic status. Désert et al. found that

grade 1 students associate high socioeconomic status (SES) with superior academic abilities compared to students who are from low SES backgrounds, regardless of their own social origin. Furthermore, the Canadian Program for International Student Assessment study showed that socioeconomic status includes economic status as well as social cultural status (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2010), which is based on "parents' education and occupations and their home possessions, such as a desk to use for studying and the number of books at home" (OECD, 2010, p. 48) and correlated to academic achievement throughout all levels of education. While these statistics were specifically associated with academic performance in Science, the Program for International Student Assessment data can reflect how culture can impact academic performance in other subject areas (OECD, 2010).

Though it is difficult enough to work within a system that reinforces class divisions, students also face struggles with class consciousness that can have psychological implications and thus put them at even more of an educational disadvantage (Reay, 2005). If students accept negative stereotypes that are associated with their cultural capital, they may experience a great deal of "fear and anxiety" (Reay, 2005, p. 922) when confronting situations that involve or implicate social class positions. For example, students from nondominant class backgrounds who are attending university may experience negative feelings such as a fear of failure or even a fear of not being good enough (Reay, 2005). Even though the Canadian postsecondary system has expanded, "social class—particularly when measured as parents' level of education—is still the strongest determinant of educational and occupational expectations and attainment" (Lehmann, 2007, p. 90). While many students (regardless of background)

often confront anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties during their transition to university, students from cultures that are underrepresented in postsecondary institutions face additional cultural, social, and even academic transitions (Gofen, 2009).

Beyond promoting cultural capital within high school academic pathways, cultural capital and social capital are further screened upon admission to postsecondary institutions. Stampnitzky (2006) explores how Harvard admissions committees screen students based on cultural capital along with academic merit through assessing grades along with a personal portfolio. Researching how cultural capital influences Harvard's selection committee, Stampnitzky found that "the admissions committee categorized applicants into doers (primarily those who would go into business and politics) and thinkers (intellectuals, scientists, and academics)" (p. 473). Relating the findings to cultural capital, Stampnitzky explains that "the expanding role of character and personality at Harvard can be seen as part of a strategy to maintain the institution's status and identity as a producer of not only intellectuals but also 'leaders'" (p. 473). In doing so, Harvard and schools that determine admissions in similar ways promote particular forms of class-based habitus and embodied cultural capital as a means to maintain the education institution's status and identity as a producer of leaders (Stampnitzky, 2006). Similarly, Zimdars et al. (2009) found that although certain markers of socioeconomic status did not directly influence admissions at Oxford, cultural knowledge did provide students with the ability to persuade the department of admissions that they possessed the character and personality traits necessary for academic success. Higher education can be considered a business that finds it necessary for elite programs to produce elite individuals in order to maintain the school's reputation and attract future applicants

(Stampnitzky, 2006). Maintaining a reputation and securing student success is done by accepting students who have an understanding of the cultural capital that the university promotes and, as a result, can privilege accepted expressions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion (Stampnitzky, 2006; Zimdars et al., 2009).

Interactions Between Educational Institutions and Home Life

A student's home life, specifically parental economic capital and family capital, can influence academic success (Adamuti-Trache & Andres, 2008; Andres & Grayson, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984; Sullivan, 2001). Bourdieu (1984) states that, "the educational capital held at a given moment expresses, among other things, the economic and social level of the family of origin" (p. 105). For Bourdieu, family support can be considered inherited capital as social origin can shape one's educational decisions. The values that students possess are often a result of the environments that they encounter and the people within those environments; therefore, if a student values reading, it is often because the student's home environment and the people within that environment were conducive to developing that particular value (Phillips & Pittman, 2003). In regards to cultural capital, values such as reading can be seen as a form of capital because strong reading abilities can lead to academic rewards. Parents who value forms of capital that produce academic rewards are likely to transmit this value to their children and therefore foster academic success (Adamuti-Trache & Andres, 2008; Finnie et al., 2006; Lareau & Horvat, 1999) and "an environment that encourages educational attainment" (Knighton, 2002, p. 25).

Because education is considered a valuable form of institutionalized cultural capital, as well as a means to improve one's socioeconomic position, students who struggle to afford the costs of postsecondary education and whose cultural capital

conflicts with what is promoted may struggle with understandings of place within the postsecondary institution (Jetten et al., 2008). Even though parental income (economic capital) does impact postsecondary participation, parental education (inherited cultural capital) has an even stronger influence (Adamunti-Trache & Andres, 2008; Knighton, 2002). Knighton (2002) surveyed 1,640 Canadian 18- to 20-year olds while also analysing data from the Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics to explore "the combined effects of parents' education and household income on postsecondary participation" (p. 26). Knighton found that access to postsecondary education is not reliant solely on grade-point average, but can be limited by costs of tuition, books, and housing. Also, students whose parents attended postsecondary education were more likely to attend postsecondary institutions themselves; specifically, students whose parents attended university were three times more likely to attend university than students whose parents did not attend university, while students whose parents attended college were just as likely to attend college as they were university (Knighton, 2002). In addition to postsecondary enrolment rates, students from high socioeconomic backgrounds felt more confident in their ability to achieve university degrees and felt that their respective families' education history would determine the pathway that they would choose (Aries & Seider, 2007). Research thus suggests that inherited cultural capital has a greater impact on students' decisions regarding postsecondary education than economic capital alone (Swartz, 2008).

In addition to parental education, Lee and Bowen (2006) determined that poverty and race are related to parental involvement within urban elementary classrooms and credited involvement levels to psychological barriers. They found that, "involvement at

school occurred most frequently for those parents whose culture and lifestyle were most likely to be congruent with the school's culture" (p. 210). Lareau and Horvat (1999) found that schools expected parents (whose children were in grade 3) to act in a particular way and to vocalize injustices in a positive and supportive manner. For example, according to Lareau and Horvat, Black families' suggestions are not taken as quickly as those of White families by schools as their frustration with the school system and the teachers' practices are often not considered legitimate. While Black families in this example had the same socioeconomic position and attainment of cultural capital as White families, they did not utilize their capital in ways that were legitimized and accepted by school officials (Laureau & Horvat, 1999). Similarly, Cuthrell et al. (2010) recognize the impact families can have on student achievement but also find that teachers and schools struggle to interact effectively with families from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Differences in cultural capital can put families at odds with the education system. Middle class families may feel more confident in addressing educational concerns while families from nondominant backgrounds may not feel as inclined to address concerns (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Lareau and Weininger (2003) suggest that this discomfort with confronting issues within the education system may be because low socioeconomic background families feel they lack cultural resources such as educational jargon to effectively challenge school officials and advocate for their children.

While parental involvement is an important aspect of student academic success, the degree to which parents from various backgrounds can participate in a child's school depends on how well familial cultural capital aligns with the school's cultural capital. As a result, students may be affected by family–school conflict because they are placed

between differing cultural fields. While parents' involvement in their child's education does not necessarily depend on their social class position or culture, parents may not feel comfortable involving themselves in activities within the school if their culture is not represented. Because parental involvement is closely linked to academic success, schools that privilege culture that is aligned with the dominant middle class must find ways to improve connections between homes and schools for students and parents who do not necessarily identify with school norms (Gofen, 2009; Lee & Bowen, 2006). Using qualitative research, Gofen (2009) studied working class students who have broken the "pattern of intergenerational inheritance of educational level" (p. 104) and found that, in every case, students credited their success to family support. Gofen also found that "many informants mentioned episodes concerning how their schools, especially their teachers, gave them a hard time, both academically and emotionally" (p. 109) and cited a particular episode where a teacher accused a student of plagiarism specifically because the teacher believed that both of the students' parents were "illiterate" (p. 109). While Gofen specifically references experiences related to schools and teacher practices, her findings represent some of the barriers posed within the education system that act to further marginalize students. According to Gofen, if barriers that restrict access to education are removed, families, regardless of social class position, can use education to overcome adverse circumstances.

First-Generation Students and Cultural Capital

The interactions between families and the education system extend beyond elementary and high school and into postsecondary education as the institutional capital of first-generation students can influence feelings of belonging (Jehangir, 2010). First-

generation students are more likely to struggle with cultural, social, and academic transitions than non-first-generation students (Gofen, 2009; Stieha, 2009; Swartz, 2008). Because education is a form of institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) and because cultural capital is often inherited (Adamunti-Trache & Andres, 2008), students whose families have not attended postsecondary education sometimes face tensions between home and school culture that can negatively affect academic performance (Gonzalez, 2001; Lehmann, 2007).

Dumais and Ward (2010) explored how cultural capital affects first-generation students' success by analyzing American longitudinal data from 1988 to 2000 and found that cultural capital influences initial access to college:

> Knowledge of the dominant culture (as operationalized by family cultural capital) helps students gain access to higher education.... Strategic interaction, particularly in the form of parents' gathering information and resources on behalf of their children, is associated both with access to higher education and graduation. (p. 262)

Despite the disadvantage that first-generation students can have, parents who have not attended postsecondary education can find alternate ways to assist their children, which often requires additional work such as doing their own postsecondary research (Dumais & Ward, 2010). While knowledge of the dominant culture and strategic interaction may not depend solely on the level of parental institutional cultural capital, Dumais and Ward still found that "non-first-generation students benefit more from capital" (p. 251) than their first-generation peers. As a result, first-generation students often face barriers to

postsecondary education that are related to their cultural capital and their parents' institutional cultural capital.

When students feel that their culture does not fit, they often feel marginalized and struggle academically regardless of their actual academic ability (Jehangir, 2010). As a result, "non-academic facts such as, social integration, level of financial support, and campus climate are also important in explaining student retention" (Collier & Morgan, 2008, p. 441) for first-generation students.

Using a longitudinal narrative research study of 25 low-income, first-generation students, Jehangir (2010) supports Dumais and Ward's (2010) findings regarding access to postsecondary education. Jehangir states that "most first-generation students must figure out how to navigate the complex path to college (e.g., financial aid, housing) with little help from families who are not equipped with this navigational knowledge of the system" (p. 536). In addition to navigating the postsecondary pathway on their own, first-generation students "carry not only their own individual hopes, but often the aspirations of their families and communities" (p. 536). Jahangir further found that along with the additional pressure to be academically successful, first-generation students struggled with "process[ing] challenging academic material that is imbedded in lived realities of students' everyday experiences" (p. 543), "practicing community and sharing space, ideas, beliefs, and workloads with peers" (p. 543), and "making sense of the inequities in their own lives and the lives of their peers" (p. 543). Through the participants' stories, Jehangir ultimately found that the tensions first-generation students faced often relate to fitting in with the cultural capital promoted in postsecondary institutions.

Negotiating Tensions Within the Education System

While cultural capital influences academic success, it can also have implications for students' identities (Gonzalez, 2001; Jetten et al., 2008). Critical feminist pedagogue bell hooks (1994) attempts to find strategies to bridge divides within education and create a space where all students can thrive. hooks writes specifically about her own experiences as a poor, Black woman who has worked within the education system to become a university professor (hooks, 1994). Sharing stories from her own life history in *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, hooks (2000) discusses how issues of class have affected her educational experiences, her familial experiences, and her understanding of herself while relating these experiences to wider social and political issues. In exploring the effects of classism, hooks (2000) highlights coping mechanisms that students may utilize to promote their social mobility—specifically, how students from nondominant cultural backgrounds negotiate their own identities in relation to those that are privileged. In doing so, hooks finds that "if one was not from a privileged class group, adopting a demeanour similar to that of the group could help one to advance" (p. 178) and therefore "assimilate bourgeois values in order to be deemed acceptable" (p. 178). Students may attempt to appear like the dominant culture as much as possible and exhibit behaviours that are most accepted by teachers and peers or, using Bourdieu's (1986) terminology, students perform privileged forms of embodied cultural capital.

The effects of adopting and performing specific forms of embodied cultural capital can prove to be severe as they can directly affect students' participation in schools. Using an interpretive research design, Gonzalez (2001) observed, interviewed, took notes, and collected relevant documents to conceptualize the experiences of two

working class, first-generation, Chicano students attending a predominantly upper-class White American university. Gonzalez found that the students believed their culture was not represented in the university environment and, therefore, they felt that they did not belong and questioned whether they should continue with their education. To confront and overcome feelings of alienation and marginalization tied to cultural representation, the students worked to create a space within the university where their culture was represented.

In creating a space where their culture was represented, the students in Gonzalez's (2001) study were able to articulate and transmit "the ideas and knowledge of an oppressed group with the function of opposing, resisting and transforming, the existing social order" (p. 561). Using similar educational case studies to examine attitudes towards university application, Reay (2005) found that many students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were anxiety ridden at the thought of attending university because of cultural concerns. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds felt that they lacked familial expertise to call upon and were thus venturing into unfamiliar territory, whereas middle- class students may feel more comfortable attending university because the culture may be familiar and family members are likely to have attended university before them (Reay, 2005). Confidence in attending higher education is important in order to be academically successful and can be promoted through finding a sense of familiarity within the university culture. Because students from dominant cultural backgrounds may already feel that university culture and home life are closely tied, they may experience fewer emotions that negatively affect

academic success than they would if there was disconnect between the culture promoted at home and at university (Reay, 2005).

Also highlighting tensions regarding culture in education, Jetten et al. (2008) surveyed 74 students in a first study and 2,635 students in a second study to examine the psychological effects upward social mobility can have on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Jetten et al. found that, "individuals identified more highly with the university when their social background was compatible with the new context they were entering" (pp. 876-877). Students who struggle with cultural capital in education may therefore make decisions to pass themselves off as something that they are not (hooks, 2000), silence their social background (Jetten et al., 2008, p. 877), attempt to outperform peers from wealthier backgrounds (hooks, 2000), or avoid particular educational pathways (Aries & Seider, 2007).

Race, Class, and Gender

Cultural capital is often used to determine class position (Bourdieu, 1984). The impact that class can have on educational experiences and the tensions associated with it are also often influenced by race and gender (hooks, 2000). It is difficult to explore classism without recognizing the effects that social class has on racial minorities and women. Studies have shown that, while individuals from a lower social class position lack access to valued forms of cultural capital, individuals who are non-male and non-White are even further restricted from acquiring privileged forms of cultural capital (Adamuti-Trache & Andres, 2008; Cole & Omari, 2003; Gonzalez, 2001; Jetten et al., 2008; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Reay, 2005; Yosso, 2005; Zimdars et al., 2009). How cultural capital influences educational experiences may depend on each student's

individual life history. While cultural capital eases social mobility for those whose culture and knowledge is already deemed valuable, many students from other backgrounds use the education system to improve their circumstances (Yosso, 2005) and therefore immerse themselves into a culture that conflicts with their own culture and upbringing (Gonzalez, 2001). Because students of nonprivileged backgrounds may feel inclined to conform (hooks, 1993), they may even come to dis-identify with their racial, gender, or class identity (Cole & Omari, 2003).

While some may argue that people should focus on the benefits that normative promoting practices provide to students (Kingston, 2001), others argue it is more important to look at ways to change how the education system promotes dominant norms and find ways to equalize the value of different forms of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). Teachers are in positions where they can expand what counts in their own classrooms and provide opportunities to students who otherwise may have been pushed out by the system (Monkman et al., 2005). As a result, it is important to analyze the individual experiences students have when interacting with the education system and struggling with the privileged forms of culture.

Conclusion

Grounded in Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural capital, research has been conducted to explore how cultural capital influences various aspects of education. Cultural capital theory can be used and interpreted differently, so it is important to note that the present study draws upon an understanding of cultural capital that is defined as the ways that norms are privileged within different contexts. In agreement with Yosso (2005), all communities and cultures have forms of cultural capital; however, the value of

cultural capital is determined by what is promoted and privileged in a certain context. Because cultural capital can influence academic achievement (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Lehman, 2007; Sullivan, 2001) and because the cultural capital of students is often connected to what is valued and promoted by parents (Bourdieu, 1984; Dumais, 2001; Lehmann, 2007; Swartz, 2008), it is important to understand how first-generation students navigate the cultural capital throughout their educational experiences. To best understand the educational experiences of first-generation students, this study uses life history research to explore educational life stories (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

My research seeks to examine how some first-generation students experience certain forms of cultural capital that are privileged in Ontario's education system.. Rather than attempting to identify a generalizable relationship between culture, capital, and academic achievement, I am interested in a participant-centred approach that explores how individuals understand, negotiate, and are influenced by culture, capital, and education. To attain a deep holistic understanding of how first-generation university students are affected by their experiences with culture, capital, and education, a life history research design is used to explore educational life stories (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

In its most basic sense, narrative research can best be defined as "a way of understanding experience" through "living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Humans translate the world around them into stories and come to understand and project themselves through the stories that they tell in their everyday lives (Andrews, Sclater, Squire, & Treacher, 2004). In research, a participant tells stories that are not just a translation of experiences but also a construction of his or her identity. Through providing personal narratives and ongoing feedback, participants work to ensure that they are represented in a way that they feel best aligns with who they are, not just how they are perceived by the researcher. Narrative research allows for an exploration of personal experiences that offer access to everyday realities and understandings of an individual that cannot be attained through other methodologies (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Creswell, 2008).

While narrative research can take a variety of forms, I specifically use life history interviews to study the educational life stories of students. Taking the form of a narrative, life histories encourage participants to share their entire life histories without limiting the stories told to specific events or environments. From the data collected through life history interviews, I analyse life stories as they relate to educational experiences. Clandinin (2007) states that, "the point of the life story interview is to give the person the opportunity to tell his or her story, the way he or she chooses to tell it, so we can learn from their voice, their words, and their subjective meaning of their experience of life" (p. 233). Because my research explores the experiences of first-generation students, life history interviews allow for a retelling and reconstructing of significant life experiences that have shaped participants' educational experiences. What is described in the interviews is the interpretation of individuals, therefore allowing myself as a researcher access not only to events but also to the understandings and implications that events have had on individuals (Andrews et al., 2004). A life history approach to explore educational life stories offer a "complex and complete picture of social life" while also highlighting "the ways in which culture and society shape and are shaped by individual lives" (Hendry, 2007, p. 489) in order to explore culture, capital, education, and the individual. In this chapter, I provide a description of the background, use, benefits, and limitations of narrative research, life history research, and educational life stories; specify and outline my research procedures; discuss trustworthiness; and describe potential limitations.

Educational Life Stories Within Life History Research

A life history approach is often chosen to track growth, maturity, and the influence of contexts of a particular phenomenon (Haglund, 2004). As a form of narrative research, life history research deepens the exploration of an individual's story by covering the entire life of the participant from the point of view of the participant (Clandinin, 2007). While narrative research can include a variety of narratives related to specific topics, the narratives used in life history research are life stories (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006). In life history research, participants retell their life history to understand the wider context of their experiences (Clandinin, 2007; Cole & Knowles, 2001). Instead of discussing specific experiences in a formal interview, life history interviews often take the form of guided conversation, "emphasizing unstructured and open-ended forms of inquiry" (Labaree, 2006, p. 127). The participant is often prompted to begin by sharing his or her life history including whatever the participant views as significant (Plummer, 2001) while being guided by open-ended questions that are adapted to each participant's unique life experiences (Labaree, 2006).

Life history research can be represented in multiple ways; however, all life history research seeks to represent human experience within a cultural context (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 9). Context, while an important aspect of narrative research, is even more important in life history research as the extent to which it is analyzed is the key defining factor between narrative and life history (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Through the openness of the data collection process, the research seeks to "reconstruct and interpret whole lives to obtain a comprehensive over-time view of people's experiences" (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006, p. 96) while also exploring "the personal,

social, economic, historical, and geographical influences that shape those experiences" (p. 96). Furthermore, through a first-person narrative retelling, the participants share their own understandings and interpretations of their past lived experiences and educational life stories.

How Life History Research Is Conducted

My research specifically uses Cole and Knowles's (2001) approach to conducting life history research while also drawing on many life history scholars and researchers (Clandinin, 2007; Labaree, 2006; Plummer, 2001). Life history research is conducted through guided conversations between the researcher and the participant within a series of interviews (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Labaree, 2006). The goal of the life history interview is "depth over breadth" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 67) as a means to "create an in-depth profile of the respondent's life experiences relative to the research problem being investigated" (Labaree, 2006, p. 126). Because a significant amount of information can be generated through life histories, a limited number of participants are chosen to represent the depth of an experience (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Labaree, 2006). In limiting the number of participants, life history researchers can focus on the depth of the material covered for each individual participant rather than attempting to gain a smaller amount of information from a variety of participants. The process of in-depth exploration is further reinforced by the interview process, as questions should be open-ended in order to prompt participants into sharing more without limiting their responses to suit the needs of the researcher (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

While the life history that the participant chooses to share is central to the research process, understanding context furthers the understanding of the complexities of the experiences (Cole & Knowles, 2001). To explore context, while asking broad, open-ended questions, the researcher should also seek to understand family heritage, family and individual health, socioeconomic conditions, religious influences, gender influences, educational background, political conditions, and personal assumptions (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Because "lives are always lived in context" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 80), it is important to recognize that "context informs one's world view through which events, thoughts, experiences, and relationships are filtered and assigned meaning" (Haglund, 2004, p. 1310). Additional information may also be collected through physical objects such as memoirs, diaries, photographs, keepsakes, or personal documents that provide more information and represent aspects of or relate to the context of the participant's life (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Labaree, 2006).

Those who use a narrative research design, specifically life histories, argue that people understand the world through narrative as stories shape reality, identity, and meaning (Andrews et al., 2004; Berger & Quinney, 2005; Plummer, 1995). In analyzing life histories, researchers are able to attain a "complete biographical picture," understand "a historical, contextual dimension," and explore the "relationship between the self and society" (Munro, 1998, p. 9). Munro (1998) argues that "the greatest strength of life history is in its penetration of the subjective reality of the individual; it allows the subject to speak for himself or herself" (p. 9). Life history, being a complete story or series of stories throughout the entirety of a life, is the construction and

reconstruction of an individual's identity and understanding of his or her experiences, self, and context (Clandinin, 2007).

Educational Life Stories

A life story can be defined as "a written or oral account of a life or segment of a life as told by an individual" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 18). The life stories told through life history research connect the individual stories to a broad life context in order to understand "experiences as they are lived out" (Clandinin, Huber, & Huber, 2006, p. 2). In organizing life histories into a series of life stories, participants' narratives become "a conceptual way to narratively understand the connections among...knowledge, contexts, and identity" (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 10). Furthermore, Cole and Knowles (2001), citing Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992), state that, "a life story is more than a recital of events" (p. 19); through organizing experiences of a life history, "the teller asserts their meanings" (p. 19).

Because my research focuses on how some first-generation students experience cultural capital within the education system, I chose to use life history research to focus specifically on the life stories that related to participant educational experiences; in other words, their educational life stories. To research educational life stories, I used a life history research design that allowed access to the context of the participants' lives. From the life stories discussed through the life history interviews, stories that related to educational experiences and cultural capital were chosen for analysis. In focusing on educational life stories within the context of life history research, I was able to gain a clearer understanding of how educational experiences connected to the participants' lives. In keeping with the theoretical context of cultural capital, it is important to understand

how the participants' educational experiences connect to their entire lives because the education system influences and is influenced by society (Bourdieu, 1984). Using educational life stories highlighted the significance that is placed on various educational experiences in relation to other life experiences.

Ethics

In accordance with the university's Research Ethics Board, I secured ethics clearance before proceeding with this research (see Appendix A). While my research did not directly pose any physical, psychological, or social risks, discussing an individual's life history may evoke strong emotions. Emotional responses in connection with the research process are mostly dependent on what the participant has lived through and what the participant chooses to share in the interview. Because a life history approach involves the participant re-telling his or her life history, painful memories may be discussed that could lead to both negative and positive feelings. While the emotions that accompany storytelling in life history research may lead to an inability to share particular stories, in sharing them the participant may also feel a sense of empowerment and liberation (Munro, 1998; Plummer, 1995). The negative emotions prompted by sharing painful stories may be a benefit to the participant as the interviews provide opportunities for the participant to "speak for himself or herself" (Munro, 1998, p. 9). To ensure that the topics discussed were those that the participants felt comfortable with, the participants were given "a shared role in decision making" (Cole & Knowles, 2000, p. 74) throughout the research process. The participants were reminded that they did not have to answer any questions that may have made them uncomfortable; provided with opportunities to review the interview transcriptions; and encouraged to add, change, or delete any

information that they felt was omitted or misrepresented. Participants also provided contact information so that they could receive ongoing feedback and information regarding the project, as it is helpful in narrative research to collaborate with participants (Creswell, 2008).

To comply with research ethics standards, in addition to addressing the potential risks of this study, I also ensured that participants provided free and informed consent to participate in the research. Students participating in a first-generation program at a mid-sized Ontario university were emailed a recruitment letter as well as a Letter of Invitation that provided potential participants with comprehensive information regarding the purpose of the study, contact information for me (the Principal Student Investigator) and my Research Advisor, and the Research Ethics Board information and file number. The recruitment email invited students who were interested in participating in the research to meet me before their initial interview to read and sign a consent form. The consent form contained information that addressed the expectations of the participant, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality, feedback procedures, and publication of results, and reinforced that participation in the study was voluntary.

I informed the participants of the voluntary nature of the research as well as the withdrawal procedures during the initial meeting. In accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*, "consent must be freely given and may be withdrawn at any time" (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Science and Engineering Research, Social Sciences and Humanities Research, 1998, p. 4, Section 2). While no participants chose to withdraw from the research, I informed them that if they chose to do so, they could decide if the data that had been

collected to the point of withdrawal could be used in the study. I also informed the participants that if they decided to withdraw entirely, all data that had been collected would be destroyed, hard copies of transcriptions and field notes would be shredded, and electronic data would be erased. I also assured all participants that withdrawing from the research would have no negative effects and that they could withdraw at any point during the research.

Using a life history approach, I could not guarantee the anonymity of data because the participants shared their life history verbally and, in doing so, revealed many identifying details. I retained personal identifiers following data collection only in the case that follow-up interviews were necessary. Because life histories follow a collaborative model (Issler & Nixon, 2007), participants were given access to the transcribed data taken from their interviews to ensure that what was written was "the clearest sense of the person's subjective understanding of his or her lived experience" (Clandinin, 2007, p. 233). While personal identifiers were revealed through the interviews, I upheld confidentiality in the final reporting of results. All identifying details were removed and pseudonyms were used. Furthermore, I maintained confidentiality by not sharing data with any outside parties; data were available only to my research advisor and me.

Recruitment

After clearance from the Research Ethics Board was obtained, I began to recruit participants through a first-generation program at a mid-sized university in southern Ontario. First-generation programs have been established to ease the social and academic transition of students whose parents or legal guardians have not attended postsecondary

institutions. A generic recruitment letter along with a formal letter of intent was emailed to the co-ordinator of a first-generation program, who forwarded the email to students within the program. While 42 first-generation students responded to the recruitment email, all respondents were sent a formal letter of invitation and an informed consent form and were asked to respond if they were still interested in participating in the research. Six participants expressed an interest after reading the letter of invitation and informed consent form, from which 3 could arrange to meet at a mutually convenient time. It is first-generation students' experiences of adapting to university life and emphases on tensions between culture promoted at home and at school that is relevant to exploring the effects of cultural capital.

Participants

Participants selected for this research were first-generation university students. I chose participants who are the first within their immediate family to attend postsecondary education because this research aims to explore how students negotiate tensions between their cultural capital, which is widely influenced by culture that the home life maintains (Phillips & Pittman, 2003), and the cultural capital maintained within educational institutions.

All students can experience cultural capital differently depending on context; therefore, because the participants' life contexts were not known before recruitment, I did not screen for race, gender, religion, or economic status. Because population representativeness is not a goal for life history research (Cole & Knowles, 2001), I invited all members of the first-generation program to participate in anticipation that diversity would arise through the lived experiences of the participants. The participants

who responded were all White women who shared many characteristics, yet they each had different life histories and educational life stories. I created a pseudonym for each participant after the interviews were complete. During the interview process the participants were labelled according to the order of the interviews as A, B, and C which were then used as the first letter in their pseudonym.

Data Collection

Following a typical life history research design, I asked the 3 participants to participate in a minimum of two interviews that each ranged from 1 to 2 hours (Cole & Knowles, 2001). While a series of 1- to 2-hour interviews may be considered brief, much important information can be transmitted in this time (Clandinin, 2007). I decided to conduct the interviews in a private room on campus to ensure confidentiality, reduce interruptions, and facilitate access.

At the beginning of each meeting the participant and I had coffee together. At this time we spent about ten minutes chatting informally until we mutually agreed that we were ready to begin the formal interview. During this time I introduced myself, discussed the purposes for my research, and talked with each participant briefly about her own life. The information exchanged during this meeting was not used for data collection or analysis but was used to get to know one another. We then moved to a room on campus that I had booked prior to our meeting. Although the participants had received the informed consent form during the recruitment phase, I reiterated important points and asked if they had any questions. Each participant then signed the forms before beginning the formal interviews. Each interview followed the same process and was held in the same room on campus.

During the interview process, I maintained neutrality and began by posing broad questions so that the participant was not guided in specific directions or limited to short factual responses (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Clandinin (2007) states that, "it is best to let the interview take its course naturally to cover all that the participant wants to cover of his or her life" (p. 237). Because the way in which each story is told is just as important as what is told, it was important that each participant was able to construct her life story in the way she wanted. Probing questions were often asked so that participants could elaborate on their experiences, especially as they related to education. The first interview was important in gaining a general overview of significant events in each participant's life in order to develop a context for the participant's educational life story. Three hours of recorded interview time was spent with both Brooke and Anna and 2.5 hours of recorded interview time was spent with Colleen. Including time before and after the interview, the total time spent with Anna and Brooke was 4 hours and the total time spent with Colleen was 3.5 hours. I completed the interview transcriptions immediately following the final interview of the final participant and returned them to participants for member checking as soon as possible.

First Interviews

The first interview was an opportunity to get to know the participants and for the participant to tell her life history. The first question that all 3 participants were asked was to describe their life history, beginning wherever and including whatever they chose (see Appendix B). Through guided conversation, I used open-ended questions by asking how the participants would describe their selves, their home life, and their school life to encourage "recollections and reconstructions of elements of the participant's life" (Cole

& Knowles, 2001 p. 35). At the end of the first interview, the participants were asked to "describe your life as if it were a book, how would you divide it into chapters and briefly describe each." Asking this question assisted me in understanding the chronology of their stories and developing connections between experiences.

Follow-Up Interviews

The follow-up interview with each participant took place approximately one week after the first interview so that I had time to reflect on the previous interview and create additional follow-up questions to probe further into experiences (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Having a follow-up interview allowed each participant and me to reflect on the discussion from the previous interview and add to the stories that were told. I often asked participants to clarify information and elaborate on experiences from their initial interview. The follow-up interview also allowed the participants to return to a familiar environment and share stories that they may not have shared before or add to ones that were previously told. In the follow-up interview, participants were asked more personal questions than in the first interview. Participants were asked to describe their relationships, personal experiences, and beliefs in relation to their educational experiences. If another follow-up interview had been necessary, it would have been held approximately one month after the initial two interviews, after the participant had an opportunity to review the transcriptions. The participants and I were satisfied with the transcriptions and therefore additional follow-up interviews were deemed unnecessary.

Data Analysis

The analysis process of my research sought to preserve the voices of the participants as best as possible and recognize the complexities of the life history in order

to avoid "reductionist, positivist assumptions" (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 100). In order to attain a holistic understanding of the complexities of the experiences of participants (Munro, 1995), I listened to the audio recording of the first interview and reviewed the notes that I had made prior to the follow-up interview so that continuity could be maintained. After the final interview, interviews were transcribed and returned to the participants. After gaining participant approval, the transcripts were analyzed for themes.

The thematic analysis was ongoing throughout the entire research process using field-notes during interviews, code notes, theory notes, and operational notes during the analysis process to maintain a constant thematic analysis and to ensure a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). During and after each interview, I wrote down as many notes as possible regarding participants' responses as well as my own reflections. Following each interview, I reviewed any notes that I had taken and listened to the recordings to ensure that there were no technical issues and to reinforce notes that were taken during the interview. These notes were expanded during reflection and used to determine some of the questions I posed for the following interview. After the interviews were completed, I continued my analysis by first transcribing the interviews and arranging excerpts that best represented experiences in chronological order. Maintaining chronological order, I divided excerpts into categories that best represented the content of the participant's discussion by looking at "key-words-in-context" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 775). To choose the passages, I selected important words and their surrounding text and organized the passages according to topic. These categories consisted of: home life, social life, school life, struggles, and

perceptions of self. Because all of the participants discussed these categories in different ways, information was then thematically analyzed.

After I organized the participants' passages according to content, I then began the thematic analysis by examining the meaning of the passages in relation to the content. I derived basic themes from the data specifically looking at the participants' discussion of the various topics connected to experiences with cultural capital and education. For example, I read Colleen's passages that discussed home life and looked at how she expressed her thoughts and feelings towards home life. I then related her thoughts and feelings to cultural capital. I then organized the passages to combine and broaden themes for each individual participant before looking at how the themes could be related to other participants. Each participant's themes were then compared and reworked so that common themes could be identified across participants. Because I had already divided the passages according to topic, I found that the themes were similar and only needed to be broadened so that they could best represent the content of the participants' discussions.

The process of thematically analyzing themes is described by Ahn and Filipenko (2007) as "teasing out the themes from the narratives and the ways in which each narrative links to that theme, while identifying possible links between key concepts" (p. 282). To understand the relationship between educational experiences and the participants' life contexts, I re-storied experiences that related to education into educational life stories. This organizing also assisted in viewing participant stories holistically. In using a thematic analysis of the narratives along with the participants' educational life stories, I was able to clearly identify how the themes connected to the

lived experiences and how the participants' stories connected to one another (Gouthro, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1995; Taber, in press).

While all thematically significant passages were used to determine the themes, I removed repetitive information for presentation in the findings section and included only the passages that best represented the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the various themes. Furthermore, to maintain a whole lived life devoid of fragmentation, I have included each of the participants' educational life stories in my findings (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Creswell, 2008; Hendry, 2007).

Trustworthiness

Validity and reliability are addressed differently in qualitative research than in quantitative research; in the former method, trustworthiness is used (Shenton, 2003). Trustworthiness allows qualitative researchers to examine "the production of reconstructed understandings of the social world" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 158) while recognizing that "it is people's perspectives that constitute reality rather than the things they perceive" (Porter, 2007, p. 84). Given the detailed nature of life history research, trustworthiness is developed through the interview process and within the details of the story. Cole and Knowles (2001) argue that it is quite difficult to mislead in a life history interview because contradictions in the story will be uncovered eventually as more detail is provided. Because the interviews were 1-2 hours long, I asked probing questions during the interview and during follow-up interviews to have the participant clarify and expand on significant events in question. For example, by asking the participants to divide their lives into chapters and to describe each chapter, I guided the participants to provide a summary of the experiences discussed in the interview while

also providing new details to connect the experiences. In asking the participants to summarize their life history using chapters, I was able to ask the participants where various educational experiences fit into their life history and connected to other life experiences. Furthermore, to maintain the voice of the participants and avoid infusing their stories with my own assumptions, I often reiterated my understanding of their stories to confirm accuracy.

While it is important to have an accurate account of one's life history, it is also important to recognize that "context informs one's worldview, through which events, thoughts, experiences, and relationships are filtered and assigned meaning" (Haglund, 2004, p. 1310), making it difficult to question the trustworthiness of participants' interpretations. Regardless, trustworthiness is more important than truth, as validity in life history research means obtaining the story that the participant wants to be told (Clandinin, 2007). Restorying the educational life stories of the participants also maintained trustworthiness because the experiences of the participants were written chronologically, allowing potential gaps in the stories to be revealed. Reviewing the transcriptions was an important process for both the researcher and the participant as it allowed for member checking to increase trustworthiness. Clandinin (2007) states that "a fundamental interpretative guideline is that the storyteller should be considered both the expert and the authority on his or her life, thus having a final say in what gets told" (p. 239). To ensure that the participant had an opportunity to review the transcriptions, and to ensure accuracy, the transcriptions were completed as soon as possible following the series of interviews. Participants were encouraged to add, change, or delete misrepresented or underrepresented information (Labaree, 2006), but all of the

participants agreed that the information that they shared in their interviews was accurate. They also confirmed that they had read the transcriptions and highlighted information that they thought was interesting.

Limitations

Although having a small participant size can be seen as a limitation in other research methods, it is ideal in life history research (Cole & Knowles, 2001). Maintaining a small number of participants ensures that a sufficient amount of time can be dedicated to each participant so that the depth and complexity of the life histories are represented. In representing the complexities associated with life history research, lives can become reduced to "a series of events, categories, or themes and then put...back together again to make up a whole" (Hendry, 2007, p. 491). While narrative and life history often is promoted as a means to recover lost voices of those denied public space, one must remember that "all research is implicated in power relations, and life history research is no exception" (Munro, 1998, p. 12). Simply through the research process, the researcher is placed in a position of dominance as ultimately the researcher's voice can overpower the participant's and the researcher can use the life history to suit his or her needs (Clandinin, 2007; Hendry, 2007; Munro, 1998). The participants were encouraged to share any information that they thought might be relevant even after the interviews were conducted by sending emails, arranging a follow-up interview, or making changes to the transcriptions. All participants read though and approved the transcriptions and 1 participant sent emails offering additional contextual information. My interview questions were open but a certain amount of guidance was used to address research needs while still allowing the participants room to share what they viewed as important.

Regardless of the challenges life history research faces, it allows researchers "to learn more than almost any other methodology about human lives and society from one person's perspective" (Clandinin, 2007, p. 241).

The role of the researcher could also influence the accuracy of the interviews as rapport and trust are important in an interviewer–participant relationship, especially in life histories (Cole & Knowles, 2001). It was therefore important to maintain a level of reciprocity with participants so they could understand my background and so that they did not feel that the relationship was unidirectional (Cole & Knowles, 2000). To gain trust and a positive rapport with each participant, I felt that it was important to spend time at the beginning of the initial interview to become comfortable with one another. Before beginning the interview, I gave each participant a brief overview of my own life history, outlining a bit about my educational career and reasons for conducting this research. When my own experiences related to the experiences that were being disclosed, I shared personal information to maintain a conversational dialogue rather than a formal structured interview. It was also important to maintain open communication throughout the research process, so that the participants felt that they had authority over the story that would be transmitted to a wider audience.

Logistics also posed limitations to this research. Because the research was conducted on a university campus, anonymity was difficult to maintain as the participants could have been recognized by their peers; however, it would have been difficult to ascertain why they were meeting with me. Furthermore, rooms where I conducted the interviews had to be booked in advance and student identification was needed to access the rooms. Scheduling the rooms was not easy because time allocations were placed on

them and the participants had limited specific time to conduct the interviews due to classes and personal commitments between midterms and final exams.

The fact that the interviews were held in the first semester of the participants' first year of university posed limitations to the extent of their postsecondary experience. All 3 participants noted that they had only just begun their university experience and felt that they could only give their initial impressions. Because this research focuses on some first-generation students' experiences with the education system in general, it was not imperative to collect data later in the school year.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Bourdieu (1984) argues that the education system is a site for cultural reproduction as it promotes and privileges dominant forms of cultural capital. As a result, the education system marginalizes students who do not "fit" into ascribed norms (Yosso, 2005).

To explore how (if at all) some first-generation students experience privileged forms of culture within the education system and determine the wider implications for students and society, the following research questions were explored:

1. What forms of cultural capital do 3 first-generation university students see as being promoted in the Ontario education system?
2. How do these 3 first-generation university students understand their own cultural capital?
3. How do these first-generation university students respond to the forms and ways that cultural capital is represented in the Ontario education system?
4. How do these first-generation university students understand who they are and where they belong socially when interacting with the forms of cultural capital that are promoted in the Ontario education system?

Participants' Educational Life Stories

In this chapter I outline the educational life stories of each participant, explore the themes that arise through the participants' experiences, and make connections between the participants' life stories and educational experiences. The participants' educational life stories are presented below in order to highlight important educational experiences and frame the context of the experiences that are later thematically analyzed. In re-telling

the participants' educational life stories and experiences, identifying information is omitted and I chose pseudonyms for all names and places. Furthermore, to enhance clarity, filled pauses such as "um" or "like" are removed from the quotations. It is important to understand that the participants involved in this research are all White and female. Research has found that non-male, non-White students are more restricted from acquiring privileged forms of cultural capital than their White, male, peers (Gonzalez, 2001; Yosso, 2005). While these participants are female, they are also White which often represents a form of privilege that may positively influence their educational experience. It is therefore assumed that the participants' gender and racial identities influence their educational life stories.

Anna

Anna is a 19-year-old, Catholic, White, female, first-year university student. She has a sister who is 3 years younger. As a young child, Anna's parents owned a business in her town but, because of the increased competition posed by big-box stores such as Wal-Mart and Canadian Tire, Anna's parents went out of business and were forced to rely on close family members for loans. Her father had to look outside their area for a job that would help pay off the debt that her parents had accumulated. When Anna was 6 years old, her father moved to a city 3 hours away in pursuit of better job opportunities, which ultimately led to the break-up of her parents' marriage. Anna and her sister have been raised by her mother since her parents separated. As a young girl, Anna had a difficult time understanding why her father left, but now, as a young adult, she feels that her parents are just "doing the best they can" (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010) considering the circumstances. Attending a Catholic elementary school, Anna had to be

bussed to a school that was outside her neighbourhood. The neighbourhood surrounding her elementary school was described as nicer than her own neighbourhood. Describing the neighbourhood that she grew up in, Anna states that "if you went down the street there you'd look at the houses and you'd think, 'Oh my god, who lives here?'" (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010). While her house was well maintained, Anna felt that most people who she grew up with in her neighbourhood did not take pride in their homes because "they [didn't] care what their house looks like" (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010). Furthermore, Anna relates her neighbourhood's cultural resources to high-risk teen behaviour, "because there's nothing to do and I think that's why a lot of kids turn to drugs and drinking" (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010). While her town did have nice areas, outsiders often considered the area undesirable due to its proximity to industrial plants. While she is "used to it...people from outside will come into town and [say] 'Oh my god, that's disgusting'" (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010).

Anna's mother always supported Anna with her education as she encouraged Anna to do well in school in order to attend university. Anna recalls that, "my mom wanted me to go to university ever since I was little" (Anna, Interview November 10, 2010). While her guidance counsellor offered little support, she worked towards achieving a university education and completed the necessary research to map out her own educational path. After graduating from grade 12, Anna decided to stay back for a second year of grade 12 to figure out what career path she wanted to pursue and to save money for university. During the latter year, her high school guidance counsellor offered a bit more support but it was her English teacher and her leadership teacher who encouraged her to become involved in various extracurricular activities in her last year of

high school and who supported her in her decision to pursue higher education. Knowing that she would be supporting herself financially through university, Anna worked 20 hours per week at a part-time job, maintained a high average, and applied to scholarships throughout high school. Anna applied to universities that would offer her opportunities for networking in her field and was accepted to her desired program. Throughout her application process, her mother was very supportive, offering advice and encouraging her to make a decision that felt right.

Since starting university, Anna has found her overall experience to be positive. While she finds it difficult to be away from her friends, family, and boyfriend, many of her relationships from high school stayed strong despite the physical distance. Her boyfriend and friends are also pursuing postsecondary education and are therefore sharing many similar experiences. Both her boyfriend and her friends are attending schools within a 2-hour driving distance so she is able to see them fairly often. Making new friends in residence has been "really easy... but it's really hard to make good friends" (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010) compared to the relationships she had developed at home. While she has found social life in residence to be busy at times, she maintains a positive outlook and positive social relationships even though at times she questions the depth of her new friendships. Within her program, Anna has seized many opportunities by participating in committees, fundraisers, volunteer work, and on-campus jobs. Social networking has become incredibly important throughout Anna's university career so that she can set herself apart from other graduates when she enters the work force. Anna admits that taking on so many extracurricular activates can be difficult to balance when facing financial pressures; however, she feels that her efforts will

eventually pay off. Ultimately, Anna's education experience has been shaped around her desire to work in a job within her field of study; as she states, "I'm not just here for school; I want to get a job when I'm done" (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010).

Brooke

Brooke is a 17-year-old, Catholic, White, female, first-year university student raised in a two-parent home with two younger brothers. Brooke's parents work in the hair styling and cosmetic industry, as her father owns an internationally recognized hair salon franchise and has developed strong social connections within the industry. Brooke began attending hair shows at the age of 3, where she was able to meet some influential people in the industry. With school taking priority, she did not attend very many shows throughout elementary school but returned when she began high school as she began to take an interest in the industry. By re-establishing social connections, she was able to access a number of opportunities such as a job at a high-end hair salon overseas during an exchange in high school.

Brooke describes her elementary school as having a close community. Her class became especially close through the deaths of two classmates in elementary school in two separate years. She found that her teachers would get frustrated by how social the class was and would discipline students who sought peer assistance during independent work: "If you talked in class you would have lines at recess…and our class worked together and…we talked it out [in] group work, that's how we learned" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010). Brooke felt that teachers were frustrated by the group because "it was hard to break us apart because of all that had happened to us" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010) and as a result she thinks that teachers felt that their power in the

classroom was threatened. Brooke described an event when a classmate was publicly humiliated by a teacher. As a result, Brooke stood up for her classmate and engaged in an enraged verbal exchange for which she was sent to the principal's office. Brooke uses this event as just one example of when a teacher became frustrated with the amount of power the class as a whole held because of their social cohesion as a result of two traumatic experiences.

During her childhood, Brooke lived in a large house on an acreage that was close to her elementary school. When her parents decided that they wanted to move to a bigger city, Brooke encouraged her parents to buy a house that she found in a small town that was close to the high school that she wanted to attend because she liked the idea of a small community.

Attending high school, Brooke found the small school community to be "cliquey" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010) and struggled with some of the relationships she had with her peers. Unhappy with the social climate of the school, she decided to complete an international exchange. After a fight with a girl at the international school, and because of a family emergency, Brooke's parents moved her back home following the incident. Returning to Ontario earlier than anticipated put her academically ahead of her peers when she returned to Canada. Upon her return to high school in Ontario, Brooke enjoyed playing a number of sports but continued to struggle fitting in socially at school because of cliques and her connection to "big city" fashion and culture contrasted with the "stereotypical" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010) farming community. Her difference in fashion and culture often led to conflict with a girl who felt threatened by the "authority" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010) Brooke had over her group of

friends. Feeling "pushed out" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010) of the group, Brooke decided to complete her 4 years of high school a year early. To complete high school in a reduced amount of time, Brooke met a great deal of resistance from her school as she was told that it was impossible to complete so much in such a short period. Brooke refused to settle for the response from the school and found a way to take additional classes online at a cost of $3,000. Intent on accomplishing her goal, Brooke had to meet the demands of an increased course load and needed to work 25 hours per week at a part-time job.

Outside school, Brooke was selected to participate in a beauty pageant that promoted girls' self-esteem. In this pageant, a number of teenage girls competed to raise money for a popular Canadian charity while supporting a cause of their own. Through this pageant the girls were given the opportunity to make social connections within the fashion industry and improve self-esteem and social skills. Brooke found this to be an eye-opening experience as she admired the girls' ambition and self-confidence in comparison to the "drama" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010) associated with her friendships from home. Brooke identifies becoming involved in women's issues, gaining the "confidence to go on stage" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010), and "meeting people [and] learning their ways of life" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010) as her most meaningful experiences from the pageant. As a result of her time spent with the pageant, Brooke decided that she wanted to work in the fashion industry.

Critical of the value of postsecondary education but wanting a strong career in fashion, Brooke applied for a number of university programs that loosely related to her field of study. Unsure of whether she wanted to gain work experience or attend

university, Brooke missed the deadline to accept an offer of admission from her top choice and instead decided to attend the only institution that would allow late acceptance. So far, Brooke finds her university experience to be similar to her experience in high school. She has found that the maturity level of her peers has not changed from what she has seen in high school and has struggled with disconnect between her coursework and her career path. Furthermore, she has struggled with the impersonal nature of the university, stating that "you just sit down and you get told what to learn" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010) and, as a result, she wishes to transfer to a smaller school in the future.

Throughout her educational experience, her decision to apply to university, and her international opportunities, Brooke's parents were always emotionally supportive. Brooke found their trust in her to be very helpful as they rarely questioned her choices and encouraged her to do what she felt was right.

Colleen

Colleen is an 18-year-old, White, female, first-year university student who grew up in a small southern Ontario town with her mother, step-father, and younger brother. Raised solely by her mother for the first 2 years of her life, Colleen does not have a relationship with her biological father but has a strong relationship with her step-father whom she considers to be her dad. She describes her home life as being very stable, stating that, "my parents are really young and they get along really good" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010) and that while her brother is "a teenager so he's kind of a jerk… he's a really nice guy" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). Colleen's mom owns a hair salon with Colleen's aunt and because there are only two employees, they

often work long hours to keep the salon in business. Colleen's father is a truck driver who was on the road often when Colleen was a child, but he changed jobs when she was in high school so that his driving no longer takes him away from home for long periods of time. Originally born and raised in a small town "bubble" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010), Colleen moved to a nearby mid-sized city in an agricultural region of Ontario at the age of 10, which "was a big change" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010).

Colleen often struggles when adjusting to new environments because she describes herself as shy and has struggled with the stigma of being identified as gifted. She states that, "I never really fit in, I was always playing sports with the boys and I've been identified as gifted" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). Colleen often became frustrated because of how teachers have treated her, as she felt that she was being singled out as different and thus tried to challenge her teacher. Furthermore, the adjustment from a small town to a mid-sized city was a difficult and eye-opening experience as she became exposed to many difficult realities facing her peers in a bigger, rougher school, such as suicide, depression, and teen pregnancy. An avid athlete, Colleen found that her participation in sports helped ease the transition and allowed her to make friends who were positive influences on her.

While sports allowed Colleen to engage in positive community-building activities, she was still very much emotionally affected by the experiences of her peers. Colleen states that, "it was people just unloading their stuff on me all the time" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). In grade 7, her best friend, who was a year older, became pregnant and had to undergo an abortion. In offering emotional support to her best

friend, Colleen found herself becoming depressed, detached from school, and alienated from her peers who were judgemental of her friend's situation. Through her depression, she became less interested in school as she "didn't care about school or anything" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010), which frustrated teachers who knew her intellectual potential. Colleen ended up resenting teachers who did not understand what was going on in her personal life and describes her high school career as "a constant fight with my parents" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). Often away driving trucks, Colleen's father took a job that required less traveling so that he could help ease tensions between his wife and his daughter in an effort to improve his family's relationships.

With the support of her friends and parents, Colleen decided to improve her grades in her final year of school in the hopes of pursuing a university degree. Colleen states that, "since I was really young I always wanted to go to an Ivy league or a really prestigious university in the States" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). As a strong basketball player, Colleen dreamed of acquiring an athletic scholarship that would allow her to pay for an Ivy League education in the United States. Due to height restrictions, she was unable to obtain an athletic scholarship and instead decided to attend a Canadian university that would offer her an academic scholarship.

During her final year of high school, Colleen took a week to travel to a developing country to help teach English. This experience shaped her career path as it opened her eyes to the struggles that people from impoverished countries face and sparked an interest in improving life opportunities for people who are at a disadvantage. Combining her childhood with her international experience, Colleen found that, "I just

really want to help people, I see a lot of stuff going on, I've seen it from such a young age" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). Gaining acceptance to the Canadian universities that she applied to, Colleen visited each of the schools with her mother and, after seeking parental advice, she decided to attend an out-of-region mid-sized Ontario university.

So far Colleen's university experience has been positive. She is getting used to working hard to achieve high grades and is enjoying the social environment of her residence. She finds it helpful that her roommate has similar educational goals and daily routines, and is pleased that a few students from her high school are living in the same residence as her because it has helped her to "break out of my shy shell" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). She finds that some first-year students in her residence are immature, which can be "annoying" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010), but she does not express her frustration with her peers in residence because she does not want to create unnecessary tension. After graduation, she hopes to obtain a master's degree from an American Ivy League school so that she can make important career connections that will allow her to help people in developing counties.

Themes

From the three unique educational life stories shared by the participants, six prominent themes emerged, which tied directly to different forms of capital: familial, institutional, economic, social, and embodied capital, as well as represented cultural capital when discussing experiences within the education system. In connecting forms of capital to the experiences of the participants, the following themes emerged:

- Familial capital: The importance of parental support in education

- Institutional capital: Gaining access through recreating normative pathways
- Economic capital: Working harder to gain capital
- Social capital: Networking to utilize cultural capital
- Embodied cultural capital: Fitting in and standing out
- Represented cultural capital: Prestige and the "All-American student."

While these themes were evident in all 3 participants' educational life stories, they were discussed in many different ways in relation to a variety of experiences.

Familial Capital: The Importance of Parental Support in Education

Despite the fact that none of the participants' parents have attained a degree from a postsecondary institution, parents were strong support systems in the participants' academic lives. While research suggests that parents who have not attended postsecondary education cannot academically support their children in the same ways as parents who have attended university, all 3 participants expressed the importance of parental involvement and emotional support in direct relation to education (Jehangir, 2010). Anna cites her mother as being one of the strongest influences on her decision to attend university, as she was always encouraged to take university-bound courses throughout high school in order to one day attain a university degree.

> Since I was little she just said you're going to university and I [said], well I don't know if I want to, and she [said] well you are [laughs]. It basically doesn't matter you're just going to go and she'd always encourage me to do well in school. (Anna, Interview November, 10, 2010)

Anna found her mother's encouragement to be beneficial as it eased her transition from high school to university and referred to her decision to attend university as "a natural step." Anna further stated that:

> It's always been drilled in my mind where I was going which is good because my mom didn't go to school and I think she regrets it because her parents never told her you should go to school, she just didn't and her parents didn't say anything about that. So I think that's why she's so insistent on me and my sister furthering our education. (Anna, Interview November, 10, 2010)

Anna recognizes the importance of parental encouragement as she believes that her mother's decision regarding postsecondary education was influenced by the lack of encouragement shown by her grandparents. Influenced by her upbringing, Anna's mother wanted her children to have better opportunities than she did and, in recognizing the importance of education, encouraged both of her daughters to do the best they could at school. In encouraging her daughters, Anna's mother demonstrates recognition of the cultural capital that school offers and actively supports her daughters so that they can access the benefits of post-secondary education.

Similar to the support that Anna received from her mother, Colleen's parents also encourage her decision to attend university because they recognize the opportunities Colleen will have access to through a post-secondary education. She stated:

> My mom never even finished high school so… she's not living through me, I don't think, but a lot of what I do is important, is more important to her because she never got to do it so she sees I'm fulfilling her dreams and my own so it's… a lot of pressure. (Colleen, Interview November 15, 2010)

Because her parents did not obtain postsecondary degrees, Colleen's mother promotes higher education so that Colleen will have better life opportunities. Unlike Anna's positive view of her mother's support, Colleen often feels a great deal of aspirational pressure from her family, which can be common for first-generation students (Jehangir, 2010). Because she was identified as gifted, Colleen found herself to be singled out as having a lot of academic potential, which was supported by her family.

> It's not only a big deal for me but it's a big deal for my mom and for my aunt and for my nana; it's tough having a lot of, all of that expectation on me. I've always had that expectation all throughout elementary school, throughout high school, and now. (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010)

While Colleen recognizes what attending university means to her family, she knows that regardless of what she decides to do, her family will support her:

> It's nice to achieve for other people but in the end it's for you, it's for what I want to do. If I really wanted to be a hair stylist, my mom would just have to deal with it: that I didn't want a Bachelors of Arts and I didn't want to go to university; I just wanted to be a hair stylist. (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010)

Colleen compares her decision to go to university with the possibility of following in her mother's footsteps as a hair stylist. Because Colleen's mother works long hours at a small hair salon and wants her daughter to break the cycle of "underachievers" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010), becoming a hair stylist would be an undesirable career choice in her family's view. Even though Colleen finds herself dealing with pressure from her family to be academically successful, she recognizes the importance of achieving her own goals. Colleen has seen her parents struggle in their careers because

they lack higher education and she believes that they do not have the freedom to change jobs because they lack postsecondary education. As a result, Colleen sees herself as breaking the cycle of "underachievers" by attending university. Her desire to strive for more is influenced by what she has seen her family go through and by the encouragement her family has given her and thus is influenced by family capital. Ultimately, Colleen discusses the value her family associates with education and, as a result, she highlights the importance of education as a form of cultural capital.

Similarly, Brooke discusses the significant influence that her parents had over her academic career, as her father is a successful hair stylist for an internationally recognized hair salon franchise. While her parents allowed Brooke to explore opportunities outside school through hair shows and family vacations, Brooke was only allowed to do so as long as she maintained high marks in school:

> We'd miss two weeks of school to go on vacation or my parents would let me miss a day to get my hair done or go shopping as long as my work and everything came number one and I was excelling in school; then if I kept my 80s and knew what was going on they didn't mind me missing a day. (Brooke, Interview November 8, 2010)

Brooke found her experiences outside school to be very meaningful; however, while her parents allowed her to explore opportunities outside the school, they still recognized the importance of education. For Brooke's parents, the capital associated with experiences outside education is almost as important as the capital associated with experiences in education. Because Brooke continues to value her experiences learned outside the education system, her experiences demonstrate how parents influence the values of their

children (Swartz, 2008). Brooke recognizes the difference in her parents' social and emotional support in comparison to her peers, stating that "it's really different but my parents more so trust me in what I want to do" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010). For Brooke, the trust that her parents had in her was very important and through trusting the decisions that she made, they showed her a great deal of support that some of her peers did not have.

In attending a school internationally, Brooke found it difficult to gain teacher support when her parents were absent in comparison to her peers' parents, who had access to the school. After being assaulted by a classmate, Brooke had to plead her case to the principal of the school. While Brooke felt that the girl who had assaulted her should have been suspended, the principal believed the other girl's plea of innocence because her parents could physically advocate for her. Brooke believes that her principal's unwillingness to believe her side of the story was because she did not have parents who were present to support her: "I guess it comes to who are you going to believe, the girl who their parents aren't backing up or the girl that her parents are getting involved" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010). Brooke felt that because she was attending school internationally, her parents could not advocate for her as strongly because they did not have direct physical access to the school. Because Brooke had already scheduled a flight home to spend time with a terminally ill relative, her parents changed the flight date so that she could come home earlier. Without parental support at the school, Brooke felt that she was at a disadvantage and therefore treated unfairly. Unable to offer the same support that was available to her peers within the school,

Brooke's parents found other ways to support their daughter that did not rely on the direct parental involvement privileged by the school.

Through the importance of parental support, the participants' experiences are aligned with the research that argues a student's home life can influence academic success (Adamuti-Trache & Andres, 2008; Andres & Grayson, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984; Sullivan, 2001). Overall, all 3 participants were very aware of the support that their parents offered in relation to their education. None of the participants discussed their parents' involvement directly with the school; instead, they valued the emotional support and encouragement that they offered outside school, even though Anna and Colleen sometimes felt familial pressure. Because the participants' parents provided their children with emotional support, they provided a form of familial cultural capital. Despite research that connects limited parental education (institutional cultural capital) to low academic achievement (Finnie et al., 2006), the familial cultural capital offered by the participants' parents promoted their daughters' academic success and influenced their decisions to attend university.

Institutional Cultural Capital: Gaining Access through Recreating Normative Pathways

All 3 participants expressed their determination and self-reliance when creating their own academic paths despite the barriers posed by the education system. As a result, the participants had to utilize their own forms of capital to overcome systemic barriers such as course streaming, lack of teacher guidance, postsecondary knowledge, and economic costs of education. Instead of fighting against the education system, the participants worked within the education system, utilizing their cultural capital and

knowledge of privileged cultural capital to access institutional capital. All 3 participants discussed experiences that outlined a time when a school staff member had discouraged them from achieving their academic goals and all 3 participants responded to these situations with different forms of resistance and by finding other ways to achieve their academic goals.

Anna discusses her guidance counsellor's lack of faith in her ability to attend postsecondary school and the counsellor's refusal to recognize her academic potential. In her first year of high school, Anna's school set up a mandatory meeting for students to speak with their assigned guidance counsellor. Anna recalls her meetings as being very negative and offering little support because she did not know what she wanted to do after high school: "I had no clue what I wanted to go to school for at that point and he was like, 'oh you better figure it out,' like 'you have to find out now,' and I'm 15; are you kidding?" (Anna, Interview November, 10, 2010). In pressuring her to decide at a young age, Anna's guidance counsellor made the assumption that if she did not know what she wanted to do in grade 9, then she would never achieve anything more than a high school diploma. Anna further explained her encounters:

> I didn't know what I wanted to do then; he [said], "why don't you take a look at those college brochures over there if you want." He didn't help me whatsoever and it wasn't until grade 12 that he realized that I could actually go to university and stuff. He really didn't have an interest in me. I went to meet him because I was thinking about taking, going back for an extra semester and he was looking at my marks and he [said], "oh you're doing really well in like biology and stuff"

> and I'm [thinking], "well, yeah, what did you expect? I'm not stupid." (Anna, Interview November, 10, 2010)

Anna felt that her guidance counsellor did not see the potential in her and she was discouraged by his lack of support. She felt that because she was unsure of her academic future, he assumed that she was "stupid" and felt pressured to follow a college pathway. The perceptions of her guidance counsellor did not stop Anna from pursuing university; instead of seeking advice from the school, Anna took it upon herself to research postsecondary pathways and to avoid being streamed by the school at a young age. While Anna did have two teachers who offered her encouragement in her final year of high school, she still felt that much of her knowledge of future prospects was from her own research.

Similarly, Brooke met resistance when she decided that she wanted to complete her high school diploma in 3 years instead of 4. Eager to gain work experience, Brooke found a way to complete high school early by completing online courses. To do so, Brooke needed approval from her school and asked her guidance counsellor for registration assistance:

> I looked online and … you could do online classes and they go on your high school transcript so I went to my guidance counsellor and they [said] no you can't do that and I [asked] why not? They [said], you know, because our school board doesn't offer that, at our school board you can only do four classes and then I [said], ok I'll do a summer co-op and they [said] no, summer co-ops are only offered to kids that … failed. … But it just didn't make sense to me… I kept looking and found a course and they [said], no you still can't do it, we won't pay

> for those courses and I [told them] well, I'll pay for them. They [asked] so your parents are? They automatically assume, oh your parents will pay that money. And I [told them] no, I will. Because they were $500 a course, I had to pay what the government would pay, so for the year that's why I had to work because it was like $3,000 for all the courses I did. (Brooke, Interview November 8, 2010)

After completing her own research and setting out her own academic path, Brooke met with resistance in the form of her guidance counsellor and the structure of the education system. Brooke refused to succumb to the barriers set by the school and worked to find loopholes in the system. Ultimately, Brooke found that the school's concern was not a matter of whether or not she could successfully complete the additional online courses; instead, it was a matter of whether or not the school was willing to pay for her academic success.

Met with such opposition, Brooke surprised the guidance counsellor by offering to pay for her own courses. With all excuses exhausted, Brooke was able to achieve her goal of completing high school early but was financially set back in doing so. The school assumed that she would not be willing to pay for the extra courses and therefore would have to adhere to the expectation that all students must take a minimum of 4 years to complete high school. Furthermore, as an alternative, her school board was willing to allow her to attend extra courses at the adult education centre, but Brooke believed that by doing so, university admissions would be critical of the quality of her education. Brooke decided to pay the high cost for online courses so that her transcript would not state that she had attained her credits through an alternate adult education program. Brooke, supported by her own research and determination, directly challenged the

structure of the education system and proved that the expectations that had been set for her were not the same that she had set for herself.

Colleen similarly outlines how she dealt with the negative effects of her grade 7 and 8 teacher's expectations. Grade 7 and 8 was a time in Colleen's life that involved a great deal of personal issues as her best friend became pregnant and was forced to get an abortion, while another friend was admitted into a treatment facility for an eating disorder. Colleen describes managing her own depression while helping her troubled friends cope, stating that, "it was like people just unloading their stuff on me all the time" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). Because of the amount of stress she had when consoling her friends, she felt that her teachers did not understand what she was going through and she disengaged from school. Having been identified as gifted, Colleen said she did not need to pay attention in class in order to achieve high marks.

> I had this one teacher in grade 7 and grade 8 and he was such a smart ass and me and him butted heads so much, I used to count how many times I would piss him off in a day and get him to yell at me because I would do nothing. At one point he threw my desk at me because he was just so frustrated he couldn't get me to do anything and I was still passing all my classes. (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010)

Colleen refused to meet the expectations that her teacher had for her and was able to earn high grades without adhering to the teacher's perception of what academic success "should" look like (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Judging Colleen based on her attitude and work ethic, her teacher felt that she should not be passing her classes. By passing her classes without adhering to the work ethic that successful students

traditionally show, Colleen challenged the teacher's presumptions. Instead of conforming to what the teacher expected of her, Colleen rebelled and demonstrated that completing homework was not necessary for her to be academically successful. Furthermore, instead of recognizing Colleen's ability and encouraging different ways of learning, the teacher became frustrated and thus acted as a gatekeeper for her academic success (Monkman et al., 2005). Had Colleen's needs been met in the classroom, she may not have felt the need to rebel as her learning style would have been accepted.

Through rebelling and defying the high academic expectations that she felt were associated with being gifted, Colleen found herself falling into the same pattern of underachieving that she stated her family members have fallen into. Describing herself as "com[ing] from a family of underachievers" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010), Colleen finds herself succumbing to wider social expectations: "I'm supposed to be so gifted and all this stuff but I just don't try and teachers and principals and stuff, the one word they used to describe me was underachiever and I don't want to be that anymore" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). Colleen was caught in a double bind; she satisfied teachers' expectations by obtaining high marks but she also satisfied the social expectation of continuing the line of underachievement in her family by not acting like a typically "good" student. Colleen concludes by stating that what is really important to her is finding her own path regardless of the expectations that are held for her. In recognizing her own goals and aspirations despite various expectations teachers had for her, Colleen has broken the cycle of what she sees as underachievement and now finds herself working towards a university degree.

Although responding positively to teacher expectations can be considered a form of valued cultural knowledge and thus cultural capital, the participants refused to meet expectations that they disagreed with (Collier & Morgan, 2008). The participants instead found alternate ways to confront barriers posed within the education system by working within the education system to create a pathway that met their needs (Gonzalez, 2001). In doing so, the participants were able to overcome barriers posed by norms promoted within the education system.

Economic Capital: Working Harder to Gain Capital

After struggling with barriers posed by the education system, all 3 participants also faced financial barriers related to higher education, which is often a barrier for first-generation students (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Along with attaining high marks, the participants also needed enough money to pay for their educations. Although research finds that parental education can have a greater influence on postsecondary attainment than parental economic capital, economic capital still influences access to postsecondary education (Finnie et al., 2006). While a lack of economic resources often restricts first-generation students' access to postsecondary education (Finnie et al., 2006; Jehangir, 2010), the participants found that working part-time jobs adds to their workload while also influencing their determination to do well in school.

Education is not detached from economic capital and, as Colleen states, through attending university she hopes to get "a good education I guess since I'm paying for it" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010) and "a job so I can pay off all of my student debt" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). To make the most of her university degree, Colleen has been putting a great deal of effort into school. She has found the

transition between high school and university to be difficult because, "in high school I didn't really ever try and never studied, everything was the night before so now that I'm doing … a ton in advance, I'm putting a lot more thought and effort into it" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). Recognizing the importance and expense of university, Colleen is willing to put more effort into her postsecondary education than she did during her public education. While she has tried to focus only on school, Colleen has found that she has not saved enough money for her first year of university. She plans on spending more time in her second semester working a part-time job so that she can continue to fund her education.

Similarly, Anna worked hard to create a better path by attending university instead of allowing herself to be limited by her lack of economic capital (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Knowing that she wanted to attend university, Anna had to plan years in advance so that she could save enough money: "I got a job and stuff and I saved for school and I applied to Ontario Student Assistance Program and I tried hard in school so that I could get good grades and I could get scholarships and stuff so that I could come [to university]" (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010). While Anna worked to access every financial resource that she could, she recognizes that many individuals would not be willing to put as much work into their education as she did. She compares herself with others from her home town:

> I've always known I've wanted to do better than what I was given so I always worked really hard to achieve that, I guess. It's hard for people from my town because a lot of people don't have the resources. I didn't have the resources; my parents aren't paying for my school. So I had to get a part-time job but a lot of

> kids just don't want to, I guess, so I just took the responsibility for myself and got a job and did what I could so that I could afford school and then at the same time applying for OSAP and everything and taking the responsibility for myself; basically... I feel like a lot of people do have it handed to them, compared to what a lot of people from my town got, which was not a lot, so kids just have to work for it more than other people. (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010)

While many of her neighbours and classmates chose not to attend postsecondary institutions because of a lack of economic capital, Anna was determined to work hard and use what resources she did have access to in order to attend university.

Like Colleen, Anna has tried to focus on her university work but has found herself facing financial pressure and has been working a part-time job (Jehangir, 2010). While university education is a priority, it is impossible to continue in education without the financial resources. Anna explains managing the demands of university with her part-time work:

> It's really hard because there's not a lot of time. It's hard because at least I get paid for the...[university] Athletics, for selling tickets, I only get 25 bucks a game but I mean, it's 25 bucks, it covers my groceries, so that's good, but it's hard to find time, I guess. You really have to concentrate on school 'cause that is the whole point of being here because graduating and getting your degree and everything. (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010)

Prioritizing her school work over her job, Anna works as much as she can as long as it does not interfere with school. While she believes that she has to work harder than her

financially privileged peers to attend university, she also attributes her determination to her upbringing:

> I grew up without like a lot of money and stuff so I think that's also why I am the way I am, hardworking and stuff compared to a lot of people who just had things handed to them that really aren't independent. (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010)

While Anna admits that it would be easier if she had been given the financial resources necessary to pursue postsecondary studies, her strong work ethic has helped her to see the value in her postsecondary education. Given her family's lack of access to economic capital, Anna has found herself even more determined to succeed academically in university. Making up for her lack of economic capital, Anna's work ethic has allowed her to be academically successful despite the various limitations she has faced.

Brooke also describes the large amount of work she took on in order to complete high school early and save money for university:

> I would go home, usually do like half an hour to an hour of online homework... because I was doing two years in one. And then usually I still had my cosmetics job and it was really busy with people on maternity leave so usually I worked 25 hours a week. I would go to work from 4 til 9 then I would come home, do some online homework, do more homework and I watched a lot of movies just online... even my weekends pretty much just consisted of homework. (Brooke, Interview November 8, 2010)

Leaving little time for social interaction, Brooke's high school years involved a great deal of work both in and out of school so that she could pay for her extra courses and still save

for university. When discussing her peers' decision to attend school based on their social relationships, Brooke states that, "there are so many people that have given up school or changed programs or changed schools to be close to someone...you have to kind of remember [your] values" (Brooke, Interview November 8, 2010). Brooke stresses the importance of recognizing her commitment to her career and life goals and is unwilling to sacrifice her education for temporary relationships because "you have to take into account what's gonna be there for the rest of your life" (Brooke, Interview November 8, 2010). In sacrificing her personal life for her education, Brooke privileges institutionalized cultural capital over the social capital of her friendships. Because she had to work hard and make sacrifices due to her lack of economic capital, Brooke strengthened her values towards her postsecondary education.

The participants' experiences with economic capital support the suggestion that "finances are often an obstacle to first-generation enrolment (Dumais & Ward, 2010, p. 263). Because the participants did not have easy access to economic capital, they often had to work harder than their financially privileged peers to have the same access to education. While the time spent working at part-time jobs may have taken time away from their education, their willingness to work hard and the value they placed on education as a form of capital helped them to balance and overcome economic limitations.

Social Capital: Networking to Utilize Cultural Capital

While social capital influences career opportunities, it also influenced the participants' decisions to attend university. All 3 participants felt that an important factor in their decision to attend university was how well they fit into the social environment of

the school and they underscored the importance of attending a school with a close community. In attending a school with a close community, the participants can navigate the social capital more comfortably than they would if they were uncomfortable with the environment of the university (Lin, 2000; Nora, 2004). As they noted,

> It was either between [a large southern Ontario school] and here [a smaller university] and so we went to [a large southern Ontario school] and me and my mom were [agreed that] this sucks, we did not like this at all, my mom's like if you still want to go here that's not a big deal but I didn't like it. I [thought] ok, good, because I didn't like it either. And then we both came here and we talked about it on the car ride home and it was, this is a lot closer community, a lot like home feeling than any of the other universities. (Colleen, Interview November 15, 2010)

> So, I think [my school] is good because it's a smaller school and stuff and it was easier to talk to people I guess so that's why I chose it based on that day ' because I could actually talk to people and get to know what I'm getting into, I guess. (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010)

> I'm debating to transfer to [an even smaller university], it's very different. I'm debating only because it's 8 hours away from home but in a sense there's 2,000 kids, class sizes are 10, the teachers are very one-on-one. (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010)

All 3 participants highlight the importance of community in the school that they choose to attend. Given that all 3 girls grew up (in part) in small towns, it is important to recognize their desire to attend a school that promotes a similar close-knit community.

This connection demonstrates the importance of having one's cultural capital represented in the education system as the participants felt that their cultural capital best fit into a smaller community that would enable them to fit in academically and socially (Dumais & Ward, 2010; Lehmann, 2007; Nora, 2004). By feeling comfortable within the academic and social environment of the school, the participants are better suited to navigate a familiar social landscape (Bourdieu, 1984; Dumais, 2001; Dumais & Ward, 2010).

While the participants see value in attending a school where they fit in socially, they also recognize that the usefulness of their degrees depends on social connections. Obtaining a university degree is an important step in promoting upward social class mobility; however, a degree alone does not guarantee a job. Anna and Brooke made strong connections between social capital and access to successful careers; creating useful social networks with people in relevant industries allows easier access to job openings (Lin, 2000). For Anna, university provides an opportunity to increase social capital and connections that she would not have if she did not attend university.

To make the most of her education, Anna felt that it is important to create a strong social network that can be utilized after graduation as a way to set herself apart from the crowd. Referring to the large number of university graduates, Anna states that

> They're all going to be competing for a small amount of jobs, especially, in the economy, it doesn't look good any more to have a college education or I have a university education, that's nothing anymore. It's who you know.... It's good to have references and do things that make you stand apart from other people, especially when you're applying for a job; on a resume it looks better. (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010)

Concerned with the amount of competition she will face when she enters the work force, Anna has used her time at university to build her social capital:

> I'm doing as much as I can to do volunteering, working, and getting to know people and I'm trying to get to know people like in the upper years of [my program] just so they can help me and stuff. They're graduating 2 years before me; who knows, they might hire me one day. (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010)

Anna further states

> I'm thinking if I can get in with the people now, then I can apply and have a better chance to, like, have a leg up on competition when I'm in third year or whatever; so, you have to, I guess, just take every opportunity you can to stand out, or you'll just blend in with everyone else. (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010)

Anna seizes every opportunity to gain valuable experience inside and outside the classroom as every activity she involves herself in relates to her chosen career path. Anna is very aware of the importance of strong social relations and actively works to build the necessary capital that will benefit her in the workforce. In university, Anna has access to many more opportunities than she would have had outside school and makes the most out of these opportunities.

For Anna, the most meaningful relationships and experiences in university are those that can benefit her career. While friendships are important, she indicated that she felt the focus of university should be to gain institutional and social capital. Anna strategically uses the social capital that is available to her in an effort to stand out against the crowd of future career competitors. Her assumption is that if she is able to make

strong social connections in her early years of university, these relationships will only continue to grow and thus further benefit her after graduation. In utilizing social capital, Anna will add value to her institutional capital (Bourdieu, 1986) as through combining social connections and education, Anna increases her access to a job and thus economic capital.

While Anna builds her social capital through opportunities provided by the university in her specified degree program, Brooke, being in a broader field of study, finds that university does not provide social capital for her specific career goals. While Anna's university courses are very specific to her career, Brooke's broad sociology field does not strongly connect to a career in fashion. The social relationships that she has made outside school have offered Brooke more opportunities than university has so far, and she is pursuing a university degree simply to appease common belief that a degree represents competence and ability. Brooke has strong reservations when it comes to the value of a degree and she privileges connections and real-world experience over the usefulness of the degree:

> I think it's not so much about what people learn in the school because that's the same as what they learn outside, so how they talk to different people and different programs. I guess university for a lot of people is a place to find themselves in a way and they learn what they're like, what they want; school kind of comes with it, but I think more people would comment on what they learned in university rather than what they learned in a lecture hall, I guess. (Brooke, Interview November 8, 2010)

For Brooke, the true learning of university does not necessarily relate to the courses, but rather the entire social experience of interacting with different people. Brooke sees little value in course content as she does not feel that grades in courses adequately represent her intellectual ability:

> Yeah, everyone idealizes university like, "oh I'm smarter"... but in general, is it? It all depends on what outcome. Yeah I guess I'm doing the same thing, I'm going to university because I can and because generally that's supposed to get me a better career but even in the magazine industry, they want you to have a university degree. (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010)

While Brooke finds that a university degree is often necessary to get a job, she feels that what is done with the degree depends on what has been learned through life experiences. Brooke discusses the importance of life experience:

> Someone could go to Harvard and someone could go to... [a less prestigious university], if the person that goes to Harvard can't talk, who's going to get the job? I don't know, I guess college doesn't even teach you that, it's just life skills; you've got to learn through experiences and if you don't have those experiences or don't try for those experiences you're not going to get them. (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010)

To Brooke, success does not depend solely on education but what is done with the education. Challenging traditional banking methods of education (Freire, 1993), Brooke sees that information obtained through a degree is only one form of cultural capital and that to be successful, learning how education systems and social networks operate are just as valuable forms of knowledge as content from courses.

Brooke relates her perception of the usefulness of social capital to her own educational experiences stating that her marks are less important than what she has learned from interacting with her professors: "I learned things from someone through talking to them and relating to them, that is more important to me" (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010). From her experience, Brooke has found what she has learned socially to be more beneficial than what she has learned academically. Brooke's valuing of different forms of capital show that capital that is "more accessible, more profitable, or more legitimate... tends to induce a transformation of asset structure" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 131). Therefore, Brooke's value of social capital over institutional capital within the education system differs from Anna's because educational institutional capital does not allow her the same access to a career as social capital. While she sees the necessity in achieving the institutionalized capital that university offers, utilizing social capital can determine the true value of a university degree.

Colleen also recognizes the importance of using social capital to access career opportunities; however, she relates closely to Anna's perception that universities provide opportunities for social networking. For Colleen, prestigious schools often have more connections to the workforce and, therefore, it would be in her best interest to attend a well-known university so that she could get a job with an international organization:

> With the [program] at [a prestigious American university], they give you a full-year internship at the UN or somewhere in Africa or South America where there's conflict going on, so they give you a foot in the door already to get a job. (Colleen, Interview November 15, 2010)

Colleen recognizes universities' social capital and the benefit of attending a university that has access to career opportunities. The value of the degree obtained by Colleen depends on the social capital of the school. Unlike Anna and Brooke, who see social capital as something to obtain independently in addition to a degree, Colleen sees social capital as being part of a university. Regardless of how social capital is obtained, through their educational experiences, the participants "accumulate experience and knowledge which may not be directly profitable in the academic market" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 23) but will likely be profitable in the job market. As a result, what the participants learn in the social context of education can be just as valuable as what is learned through their academic courses.

While all 3 participants saw social capital and postsecondary education as interacting in different ways, all 3 stressed the importance of having strong social networks in order to utilize their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 2001). The participants all agreed that access to career opportunities (and thus economic capital) was easier when cultural capital was supported by social capital.

Embodied Cultural Capital: Fitting in and Standing Out

All 3 participants discussed their different struggles when trying to fit in with the social groups of the schools they attended. The participants related fitting in socially to positive academic experiences, stating that it was important to maintain social conformity and to act in particular ways that would encourage social acceptance. While social networking is important to all 3 participants in relation to career opportunities, embodied cultural capital can also affect educational experiences.

Describing herself as a shy person, Colleen often struggled to fit in because she was not as outgoing as her peers and, therefore, she had difficulty meeting people. Entering university, Colleen has found that making friends at university has helped her to enjoy her educational experience so far:

> I have to meet people who I've never met before and I have to make these people my friends because I'm not leaving anytime soon so I have to, I sort of had to break out of my really shy shell and sort of be outgoing and friendly. (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010)

Recognizing what is accepted in new social groups, Colleen works to change her natural demeanour of shyness to appear outgoing and friendly. Changing her demeanour is not easy for Colleen but necessary if she is to "fit in." To help her "break out of [her] shell" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010), Colleen finds it easy to rely on friends who are outgoing. Colleen feels fortunate to be surrounded by people who she knew before university but was not close to in high school:

> There's three of us, so it's nice to have them because they sort of help me get out of my shell and shyness and I'm hanging out with them and hanging out with the people they're hanging out with so that helps me open up but a lot of people I just made friends with here, I can tell I would never be in the same social group as them in high school. (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010)

Even though Colleen may not have been friends with them in high school, she opens herself to new friends and builds off past relationships to promote new friendships. In doing so, Colleen adjusts herself to the social climate of her university in an effort to make the most out of her time at school.

Similarly, Anna describes how her shyness can hold her back from opportunities and she challenged herself in her second year of grade 12 to break out of her shyness and open herself to social opportunities that would benefit her in university:

> Yeah I changed a lot, but I used to be really, really shy and kept in and everything. I didn't like to put myself out there, but going to school changes that I guess, and going to high school especially helps you get out of the box because they kind of challenge you to do more and promote yourself. And same thing with university, I find you have to be independent or else you're completely screwed. (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010)

Anna finds that overcoming her shyness and involving herself socially in her schools is beneficial to her because it will open herself up to more academic and social opportunities. In addition to overcoming shyness, maintaining a positive demeanour with her peers is important to maintain positive social relationships in residence:

> You have to be nice and I feel like a lot of people don't really show their true selves here, and I feel like they probably will after a couple more months of school because it's hard, it's pretty exhausting, to be smiling all the time. So with social life, you don't have as many true friends. If I come back home I appreciate my friends a lot more because I actually have someone to talk to about real issues and stuff when I wouldn't really feel comfortable talking to my housemates about that because I'm not so comfortable because I've only known them since September. (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010)

Anna expresses her difficulty trusting her peers in residence because she is not comfortable being her true self around them and, similarly, she feels that they are not

being their true selves either. Hiding negative emotions and smiling all the time is seen as an important part of making friends in residence but it limits the depth of friendship that she can have. Furthermore, Anna considers that:

> because people just want to make friends really fast, they're gonna be as nice to you as they can and you're gonna be as nice to other people as you can and try to do anything just to get yourself out there. (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010)

Because of the efforts her peers will make in order to make any friends, Anna wonders if her peers are concerned with the value of friendship or if they are acting in specific ways to gain social acceptance. Because Anna finds it difficult to be happy all the time, she worries that she will create a negative impression of herself if she decides that she needs some personal time amongst the constant social interaction of residence:

> It's easier to make friends if you're really happy and outgoing compared to if you're just like, "oh I need my space today," so I think that's why they try to fake a smile all the time. Not fake a smile, obviously you're smiling sometimes because you want to, but sometimes you don't. (Anna, Interview November 2, 2010)

Regardless of how she is actually feeling, Anna often finds herself acting based on how she will be perceived by others. In doing so, Anna is acting according to accepted social behaviours and according to embodied cultural capital that will allow her to fit in socially, thus her sense of belonging and acceptance will improve her experience in residence (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Lehmann, 2007). By representing herself in socially accepted ways, Anna feels that she is compromising the quality of her relationships and suppressing pieces of her personality that she does not feel will fit in

with the social climate of residence. As a result, Anna feels more comfortable with her friends at home because she is able to be her true self.

Colleen reinforces her reluctance to express emotions that are viewed as negative in residence when dealing with conflict between herself and her bathroom-mate. Frustrated by her bathroom-mate's lack of cleanliness, Colleen is willing to sacrifice her own lifestyle preferences in order to maintain a positive social climate:

> So you don't want to be rude. If they persistently do stuff to annoy you and they know it's annoying you then you [can] be confrontational but, and especially it's rez, you're living with all strangers, people you've never met before, you don't want to give off the wrong impression like you're this naggy person. (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010)

Expressing the importance of maintaining a positive image in wider society, and especially in residence, Colleen is willing to sacrifice her own needs recognizing the importance of presenting particular dispositions that are commonly accepted. In doing so the participants are connecting the importance of embodied forms of cultural capital with the importance of social capital. As embodied cultural capital represents attitudes and dispositions, in enacting privileged representations of embodied cultural capital, the participants are gaining social capital (Bourdieu, 1984). In doing so the participants are conforming to accepted forms of self-expression instead of expressing how they are truly feeling.

Similar to Colleen and Anna, Brooke has found the people she lives with off campus to initially be easy to get along with; however, as time has gone by people have begun to show their true selves, which has been a difficult experience. While Anna and

Colleen are happy with their social relationships and educational experience, Brooke's negative experience has lead her to question her place at her school. Brooke, being the only participant with a very negative social experience, is also the only participant with a strong desire to change schools in search of a more positive community. Because schools promote dominant forms of cultural capital "which at every moment, exists in an 'embodied state'" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 133), it is important for the participants to represent themselves in ways that adhere to the dominant culture to fit in socially. For the participants, this meant feeling pressure to hide emotions and comply with the actions of the dominant social group.

Represented Cultural Capital: Prestige and the "All-American Student"

All 3 participants talked about how schools are perceived and made more desirable based on the prestige associated with the school. While the participants focused specifically on how prestige is associated with certain universities, connections were also made between prestige and good reputations in public schools. Furthermore, connections were made between the prestige associated with the school and the students that the schools target in marketing campaigns. The participants discussed how they saw the ideal student represented in order to sustain and promote a particular dominant university culture. All 3 participants discussed the importance of maintaining university and student image (Stampnitzky, 2006). All 3 participants recognized the importance of attending a school that had a positive reputation as they discussed the desirability of attending "cultural capital heavy" (Jaeger, 2009, p. 1945) university instead of "cultural capital light" (p. 1945) college as well as the importance of further education. While Anna and

Brooke specifically referred to marketing strategies that universities use to maintain prestige, Colleen discussed her desire to attain a degree from a prestigious university.

From a young age Colleen believed that a prestigious degree would provide her with a better education than attending a school that did not have a highly regarded reputation. Colleen states that, "since I was really young I always wanted to go to Ivy League or a really prestigious university in the States" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). While Colleen wanted to attend an American Ivy League university, she also discussed her desire to attend an Ontario school with the same perception of prestige. While she could not afford to attend a "prestigious" American school, she applied to a Canadian school with an "Ivy League" academic reputation but did not attend because she felt that she did not fit in with the culture of the school. Describing the image she associates with a prestigious school, Colleen states that, "[it] is really prestigious and old vines up the old walls of buildings, and I always pictured myself going to school like that" (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010). Describing a prestigious university as having distinct visual features associated with being old, Colleen seems to associate the school's quality of academic opportunity with in the school's age and longevity. Furthermore, describing the school's appearance and reputation, Colleen views academic prestige as just as evident in Canadian schools as American schools.

Contrasting the image of prestige she holds for Ivy League universities, Colleen describes her elementary school as being rough and undesirable. Not only did many students within Colleen's class deal with issues such as teen pregnancy, depression, suicide, and eating disorders but they also dealt with these issues within a school with a poor social reputation:

> One of the most run-down elementary schools in the city… the south end is like sketchy; I don't want to be rude but, and then the north end is more fancy… higher income homes and families and then there's this school and it's so junky; we had a gym and it was like my rez room times four, maybe, and that was our gym. (Colleen, Interview November 5, 2010)

Colleen's elementary school's physical layout and appearance reflects the school's reputation. In a poorer part of town, her elementary school was not well taken care of while in the richer part of town the school was nicer. While her quality of education may have been influenced by the resources, it was also influenced by perceptions of the social climate. Although the school may not have had the same objectified cultural capital as schools in high socioeconomic areas, the quality of teaching and social environment could have compensated for the lack of resources. Through Colleen's experience, attending a "good school" is connected with the physical image of the school as well as the reputation.

Anna stresses the importance of attending university over college when describing how she made her choice to follow the university pathway. She states that, "I would do the harder classes, academic as opposed to applied and university as opposed to college, not [that] it's bad to go to college or anything, I think college is good but I thrived more in university courses" (Anna, Interview November, 10, 2010). While Anna does not place particular value on college over university, in connecting university courses to a higher difficulty level than college courses she is recognizing the distinction that is often made between postsecondary pathways (Jaeger, 2009). Similarly, when discussing her encounter with her guidance counsellor, she associates the counsellor's lack of academic

support with his perception that she is "dumb." Through distinctions between college and university, the academically prestigious image of university is promoted by schools and reinforced by students who choose to attend university.

Brooke highlights how the image of prestige for universities is without warrant but still upheld through the collective values of older generations. Brooke states that, "you look at college, even how they present it on the website and it doesn't look like you can get the same jobs… it's like a faux pas if you can get 80s in university, don't go to college" (Brooke, Interview November 8, 2010). Brooke highlights the link between social perception and how images of prestige are created in favour of universities as she describes the social unacceptability of settling for college if you have the ability to attend university. Students therefore make decisions not on quality of education, but on how the educational institution is valued in society.

When determining what forms of education are valued in society, Brooke was sceptical of the true value of education:

> Our society has made university seem like you have to go there. If you see all the stats, it's like, what is it? You make 40% more money if you go to university but really, do you? … Who's making more money in the end? … I could have went to hair school and helped my dad with his business, took it over, I probably would have made the same or more than what I would going to university. (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010)

She furthermore takes issue with the divide created between college and university:

> Even though it's university and people say, "oh everyone's here to learn, don't go to college… college is just party," if you hear of everyone in my town goes to [a

> local college] because it's the college for farming so they want to farm. And it's, "oh [the local college is] a party school," well yeah, isn't university the same way? (Brooke, Interview November 3, 2010)

To Brooke, the prestige of university is unwarranted and only upheld because of societal perceptions. However, while challenging how forms of institutionalized capital are valued, Brooke still finds herself attending university to satisfy social expectations. Although Brooke believes that she could build a career despite her education, she still decided to attend university in order to attain institutional cultural capital. She felt that despite her own views regarding postsecondary education, society still privileges a university degree and thus she thought that it was important for her to obtain a degree. Ultimately Brooke cannot change the social system and, therefore, she must conform to attain the cultural capital that has been deemed most valuable in society to pursue her desired career path.

For Anna, prestige is upheld not only by how society values education but also by how universities market to society. Feeding into one another, school reproduces dominant society while dominant society is reproduced in schools. While Anna and Brooke both associate normative attire with wearing preppy clothing such as "Hollister" and "Abercrombie," Anna makes the explicit connection between dressing in particular ways and fitting into university. While Brooke mentions that she did not fit in during high school because she did not wear "Hollister" clothing, Anna recognizes that she fits in at university because she wears styles similar to that promoted by Hollister. Clothing companies such as Hollister and Abercrombie are what Anna refers to as being "All American," aligning with the White, heterosexual, middle-class norm influenced by the

United States. Colleen further emphasizes the value of being "All-American" as her ideal school is a highly reputable American university.

Describing the importance of dressing according to the "All-American norm," Anna discusses how people would find clothes to wear during out-of-uniform days at her Catholic high school. Out-of-uniform days were an opportunity for students to represent themselves through clothing:

> Some people go shopping before the jean day which is the day we could just wear our normal clothes so they'd go out and buy a specific outfit just so they could look good on their jean day. Everyone kind of looks the same on those days because everyone's wearing the same clothes. Also when you're in high school, I think some, a lot of kids, their parents still buy their clothes so your parents are going to want to buy you a certain style of clothes too. You're going to want to buy your kids' clothes from American Eagle or Hollister or something, compared to, like, Hot Topic and like scary things. (Anna, Interview November, 10, 2010)

Anna associates having new clothes with looking good on jean day and, while the students are trying to represent themselves, they end up conforming to a particular accepted look that is reinforced by the parents who encourage their children to appear in certain acceptable ways. While the "All-American" look promoted by American Eagle and Hollister is privileged, gothic subculture style as promoted by stores such as Hot Topic is commonly perceived as "scary." In comparing how the two different styles of clothing are perceived by the dominant society, Anna clearly articulates what cultural representations are encouraged and what cultural representations are rejected within the

aspects of the education system. Anna extends her high school example to university, arguing that little has changed and certain styles are undoubtedly dominant:

> I mean you see people walking down the school here and every single person is wearing Lululemon track pants, tucked into Uggs with their Coach bag. That's the only thing, that's the only sense of style everyone has at this school for some reason. Obviously I have Lululemon pants and boots and stuff so I'm not trashing it, but people should try to look different and not be defined by a certain brand. (Anna, Interview November, 10, 2010)

While Anna encourages people to look different, she also recognizes the importance of conforming to the norm at her university as she admits that she often dresses in accordance with the "All-American" style.

Promoted in high school by parents, normative fashions extend into university and are reproduced by advertisement campaigns. Universities do not maintain their prestige solely through their longevity and connection to the workforce but also through the students that they recruit and the students that they present in recruitment materials:

> I think that if they were going to do something they are going to prefer like a normal looking, All-American type kid compared to someone covered in tattoos and piercings—that looks kind of scary so I think image is important and that's kind of represented in what [universities] put in their brochures and stuff too. You don't see Goth kids or something or people with lip piercings all over their face in their brochures. You see nice people wearing American Eagle sitting there in the sunshine being happy basically. (Anna, Interview November, 10, 2010)

Anna highlights the desirability of the "All-American type kid" when advertising for universities as opposed to a student who does not fit the normative image of a "good student." For Anna, universities justify their choice of student representation based on the norms promoted outside the school in the business world and wider society. These norms are narrow and, while the school appears to promote diversity, the diversity that is promoted aligns only with what is most accepted:

> It's definitely like they try to show diversity with gender and with race but they don't show diversity with personal sense of style and stuff in their brochures. So they'll be Black, White, Asian, female, male, whatever else but they're not going to show two guys holding hands or some person with a lip ring or something, do you know what I mean? In reality there are people here that look like that but they want to recruit people and also they want to recruit your parents as well and I think they're trying to look like what the highest people in society would look like. (Anna, Interview November, 10, 2010)

When asked to explain how she envisions the highest people in society, Anna responded by saying that:

> I guess they look like what the pamphlets show. Basically people that are in nice clothing and look nice are generally attractive people, obviously, because you're not going to advertise using unattractive people. They show that but also they want to be shown as accessible to all people too....They'll offer scholarships and financial aid and stuff, they'll still talk about that but they're not going to show people in old clothes. At the same time they're not going to show people in

> Armani or something, just so it's not over the top. I guess they still try to market to the richer people. (Anna, Interview November, 10, 2010)

In Anna's eyes, universities recruit and promote a specific type of student who is White, heterosexual, and middle class in order to appeal to the status quo. Anna uses descriptive words such as "nice" that indicate that universities advertise appearances that are commonly accepted and do not deviate from social norms. After outlining how the university promotes the All-American image, Anna admits that it is not an easy image to conform to and does not adequately represent universities' populations, although she admits that overall it is probably a good image for the university to maintain:

> I don't think that it's applicable to everyone so I think it's hard for some people to achieve because obviously not a lot of people can afford to buy really nice clothes or something, especially when they're going to university. So it's kind of hard but I think it's a good image... and I think it breeds students to look a certain way and act a certain way too, and it kind of makes them want to be like that and look like that and I think that's also what the work world wants. (Anna, Interview November, 10, 2010)

Anna's explanation of how universities promote particular appearances reflects how embodied cultural capital in general is promoted in the education system. Through various advertisements, the university that Anna attends promotes a particular representation of culture and supports diversity that does not overly disrupt the status quo. Different races and genders are represented through university advertisements; however, different sexual orientations and subculture styles are noticeably left out. While universities do promote specific and limiting norms, Anna is not limited by what is

represented because she fits the status quo to an extent. While Anna finds that it is hard to afford nice clothing, her style in general fits with what is represented. Furthermore, Anna recognizes that what is promoted in universities aligns with what is promoted in companies and therefore it is in students' best interest to align with normative styles in order to be successful in the workforce.

The participants' views regarding how prestige is represented and who advertisements represent reiterate Bourdieu's (1984) theory that the education system is a site of social reproduction. Connecting to Stampnitzky's (2006) review of cultural capital in Harvard's admissions criteria, the universities' advertisement campaigns and reputation similarly screen for cultural capital. Through promoting dominant forms of cultural capital through media such as advertisement campaigns, the universities encourage students who fit with dominant representations of culture to apply. The dominant culture is then further reinforced by the dominant student population, which also represents and reproduces the cultural capital that is promoted by the school.

Summary of Themes

The predominant themes underlying the participants' educational life stories directly and indirectly corresponded to forms of capital. Despite the fact that none of the participants' parents had attended postsecondary institutions, parents were strong support systems in the participants' academic lives as all 3 participants expressed the importance of parental involvement and emotional support. The participants valued the different ways that their parents showed support. While the participants' parents do not have the same institutional cultural capital as their non-first-generation peers, through their

support they offer family capital (Swartz, 2008) and support navigating the social capital of the schools.

While the participants' attitudes towards academics differed, they still expressed their determination and self-reliance when creating their own academic paths. All 3 participants discussed experiences that outlined educational struggles that had discouraged them from achieving their academic goals. These struggles were responded to by finding another way to achieve their academic goals, which often involved overcoming more barriers than their financially privileged peers. While Brooke and Anna shared the demands of balancing work and school in order to afford school, Colleen mentioned obtaining a job in her second semester of university to pay for school. Even though Anna and Brooke felt that they had to work harder than those who have it "handed to them," Anna in particular expressed that because of her hard work and determination, she does not take her educational opportunity for granted. The participants' understandings of and actions within the education system may have been shaped by their struggles with privileged forms of cultural capital. In utilizing various forms of cultural and social capital, the participants were able to work within a system often regulated by privilege in order to achieve academic success.

The participants also recognized the importance of earning a university degree as a way to improve their socioeconomic status. While the felt a degree was important, Anna and Brooke made strong connections between social capital and success. They saw social capital as a crucial component to having a successful career. For Anna, university provides her with the opportunity to increase social capital and connections while Brooke's valuable connections have been made outside school, leading her to value

connections and real-world experience over schooling. Colleen did recognize the importance of career connections but plans on creating her social connections through a postgraduate program.

While social capital can be seen as an important component of utilizing a university degree, it is also an important component for fitting into the social environment promoted in education institutions. The participants recognized the importance of fitting in socially to improve academic experiences, and thought that it was important to act in ways that would encourage social acceptance.

Finally, all 3 participants talked about perceptions of universities and the desirability of attending a prestigious university. They reflected on the importance of maintaining normative university and student images. Anna and Brooke specifically referred to marketing strategies that universities use to maintain prestige and both were sceptical of how universities promote specific representations of culture. Brooke questioned the true value of a university degree while Anna saw universities' marketing of an ideal student as unrealistic. Alternately, Colleen recognized the importance of attending a prestigious university as a way to access career opportunities and strives to one day earn a degree from a reputable American university.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to examine how 3 first-generation students experience certain forms of cultural capital that are privileged in Ontario's education system (as a social institution) and how interactions between capital that is possessed and capital that is privileged affect these students' educational experiences and perceptions. Using a life history research methodology, this research aimed to explore individual experiences within specific contexts in order to understand how some students experience cultural capital. While themes were derived from the participants' interviews, these themes were often addressed and experienced in different ways. This chapter reviews the findings with connections to literature, discusses implications for schooling, presents limitations, and makes suggestions for future research.

Summary of Findings

After chronologically organizing the participants' educational life stories, I analysed themes in relation to the context provided by the interviews. Relating the themes to the participants' educational life stories added depth to the analysis because it provided a detailed context to understand how the themes operated within educational experiences. Ultimately, the following themes were derived by analyzing the data collected through life history interviews:

- Familial capital: The importance of parental support in education
- Institutional capital: gaining access through recreating normative pathways
- Economic capital: Working harder to gain capital
- Social capital: Networking to utilize cultural capital
- Embodied cultural capital: Fitting in and standing out

- Represented cultural capital: Prestige and the "All-American student."

Each of the participants' educational life stories revealed themes that directly correlated with forms of capital. While familial capital was an important resource for academic success, the participants valued their parents' emotional support over direct academic involvement. While the participants' parents were supportive, often the education system was not; instead the participants experienced many barriers and tensions as a result of the education system. The participants thus had to recreate normative pathways in order to overcome the issues posed by the education system and access institutional capital. In addition to recreating normative pathways, the participants also described difficulties posed by their lack of economic capital. The participants describe the additional effort they had to put into their education because they did not have the same economic capital as their financially privileged peers. Despite the importance of institutional capital, social capital was an important way for the participants to effectively utilize their cultural capital, specifically in relation to their careers. The participants agreed that strong social networks in addition to institutional capital allowed greater access to jobs than institutional capital alone. To access social capital, the participants discussed the need to represent embodied cultural capital in accordance with what is privileged by the social or educational system. The participants represented privileged forms of embodied cultural capital in order to fit in to their environment and to maintain positive social relationships. Finally, cultural capital can be physically manifested and promoted by educational representation such as advertisement campaigns and physical appearances of schools.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that, "it is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory" (p. 46). In relating the themes to various forms of capital, the participants' views are presented regarding how the education system is structured and functions in relation to privileged forms of cultural capital. While aligning with forms of capital, the themes also aligned with the initial research question as they addressed the primary focus as follows.

Cultural Capital Promoted in the Education System

Research suggests that forms of cultural capital associated with being White, heterosexual, and middle class are promoted within the education system (Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Yosso, 2005). While first-generation students are "more likely to be students of color, immigrants, student-parents, low-income, and above the age of 24" (Jehangir, 2010, p. 534), "there could be other variables that apply across race/ethnicity lines to lower income first-generation college students" (Stieha, 2010, p. 247). As a result, when considering the lived experiences of first-generation students, it is important to consider that "otherness in terms of first-generation and lower socioeconomic status is not visible... [and] the cost of that invisibility is that [first-generation students from visibly privileged cultures] can easily slip through the cracks of the institution" (Stieha, 2010, p. 247).

How the participants viewed the education system's cultural capital was expressed predominantly through their tensions with fitting in and during their critique of the education system. While the cultural capital privileged by the education system was not always explicitly stated, the essence of what one "needs to be" was expressed through

Anna's description of the "All-American Student" and the participants' perceptions of how universities present themselves. Picking up on how norms are advertised through campaigns, Anna and Brooke questioned the cultural capital promoted and reinforced through universities as shown through their critique of universities' advertisement campaigns and notions of prestige. Although they are critical of how dominant culture is reproduced through the education system, they also recognize the value in adhering to promoted norms and are often able to do so because their race aligns with dominant White culture. The participants identify as female which may place them in positions of marginalization in the education system (hooks, 1993). While gender and race related struggles were not discussed in explicitly by the participants, their ability to conform to privileged cultural representations may have been made easier because of their race, and their struggles within the education system may have been different because of their gender.

The participants' discussions are not isolated from the public school system, as many concerns with university overlapped with their experiences in elementary and high school. For example, Anna describes Hollister clothing worn by students in university advertisement campaigns, while Brooke describes her inability to fit into social groups in high school because she wore clothing that represented her unique city style. This example highlights the transferability of norms throughout the various levels of the education system and, in reference to the participants' discussion in relation to images of prestige and the "All-American student," what the education system promotes can be related to what the dominant culture promotes (Fukuyama, 2001; Yosso, 2005). Furthermore, the participants often make connections between school and the workforce

thus reinforcing the connection between the education system and society. While Brooke may be an exception, as her style may be represented in the hair style and cosmetics industry, she states that a university degree is not necessary to earn a job in her desired profession. In connecting important qualities of a student to important qualities of an employee, schools become training grounds for the workforce where conformity and work ethic are desirable and alternate forms of expression are not encouraged (Apple, 2005).

The concerns expressed by the participants regarding how universities present themselves supports the literature concerning how privileged forms of cultural capital are manifested in education (Jaeger, 2009; Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Zimdars et al., 2009). Linking academic success to higher education, Anna's discussion of the "All-American student" articulates what images are maintained in universities. Anna explicitly identifies the culture promoted by universities through advertisement campaigns. She argues that these advertisements represent different races, dressed in name-brand clothing, showing platonic relationships which maintain a narrow image of diversity. Brooke extends Anna's analysis as she finds university to be an extension of high school where similar social structures prevail and students are expected to bank information transmitted by their professor. Colleen reinforces Brooke's perception of schooling in her belief that an ideal student is someone who stays in her or his room and studies all the time. Furthermore, the image of a prestigious university as outlined by Colleen is associated with old ivy-covered buildings and a strong reputation. As a result, qualities shown through university representation may not necessarily reflect the quality of education, therefore the associations between a school and its prestige are socially constructed.

Perceiving the capital that universities transmit and privilege, the participants reflect on the importance for students to fit particular moulds rather than encouraging diversity throughout the education system. In doing so, prestigious education is directed towards and maintained by those who align with privileged social norms (Bourdieu, 1984).

The cultural capital associated with education is not only promoted by how universities and society interact but is also reinforced throughout the various levels of the education system. As expressed by the participants, colleges are commonly perceived as being less prestigious than universities. Because the education system created postsecondary pathways, attending "culturally heavy" university is perceived as a more valuable form of institutionalized cultural capital (Jaeger, 2009, p. 1945) than attending "culturally light" college (p. 1945). While Brooke questions whether or not the value of different forms of education can be reasonably justified, she nonetheless conforms to the general expectation that she will attend university because she is academically successful. Furthermore, Colleen and Anna describe their elementary schools as being rough schools because they have fewer resources and are in poorer areas and associate nice schools as being in middle class areas with more resources. While the school's resources may have influenced the education of the students, it also influenced perceptions of the school's general social climate. The desirability of a school is not necessarily determined solely by what is learned at the particular school, but also by the school's social reputation. Desirable schools such as Ivy League schools are equated with representing more privileged forms of cultural capital (Jaeger, 2009; Stampnitzky, 2006) and, therefore, students who attend desirable schools will have institutional capital that is more valuable than the cultural capital attained at a school with a poor reputation.

Participants' Perceptions About Cultural Capital

How the participants viewed their their cultural capital was revealed through the participants' lived experiences. Cultural capital was defined in this research as the aspects of culture, such as family background, traditions, education, attitudes, behaviour, and taste that are privileged in society. Bourdieu (1984) argues that cultural capital can present itself in an embodied, objectified, and institutionalized state and, as a result, the cultural capital held by the participants varied depending on their lived experiences. Embodied cultural capital was quite difficult to determine because it is contingent on how a participant physically and mentally conducts herself. General senses of embodied cultural capital were relayed through their views concerning appearance and social conduct. For example, while Anna and Brooke discussed how they did or did not fit in according to clothing, Colleen described how she did not fit in because of her isolating experience with depression. How embodied cultural capital is represented can also depend on the environment in which the participants interact as all three recalled acting according to prescribed social norms determined by the social environments or field.

Even though objectified cultural capital is a tangible form of cultural capital, it was not explicitly stated but rather implied through the experiences described by the participants. Specific forms of objectified cultural capital were often revealed through comparisons to privileged peers or depending on what the participant determined was important within the field. For example, Brooke referred to the importance of utilizing textbooks to do well academically. She compared herself to her peers who, due to their economic privilege, do not have to worry about finding the money to buy textbooks.

Assessing one's own cultural capital through comparisons reinforces the social construction and temporality of privileged forms of cultural capital (Reay, 2005).

Within the various contexts described by the participants, cultural capital (embodied, objectified, and institutionalized) is constantly tied to economic capital. While Bourdieu (1984) argues that cultural capital can be used to promote economic capital, for the participants, economic capital is often used to promote cultural capital. Valued objectified cultural capital such as textbooks, necessary to gain institutional cultural capital, cannot be obtained without economic capital. Those who lack economic capital therefore must work harder than those who are economically privileged to pay for cultural capital associated with education, thus reinforcing unequal access to education (Jetten et al., 2008). Given the nature of the research, the participants had similar institutional cultural capital because they were the first in their immediate families to attend post-secondary education.

While the participants grew up in different circumstances, none of them seemed to be concerned with the amount of cultural goods that they had and instead made connections between coming from less privileged backgrounds and being driven to work harder than those who did have access to objectified cultural capital. The lack of focus on class-related struggles aligned with Aries and Seider's (2007) discussion regarding social class identity, as all 3 participants alluded to financial concerns regarding access to cultural capital but did not connect their financial situation to their identity. In doing so, the participants do not let economic capital alone determine their social class position as they used other forms of capital to compensate for the restrictions posed by lacking economic capital. While all 3 participants do associate ease of access to privileged forms

of cultural capital with having economic capital (such as the cost of textbooks needed for university courses), the analysis indicates that the participants did not question their ability to be academically successful because of their cultural capital. The participants were academically successful despite having to work harder to attain economic capital as they were able to effectively utilize their own cultural capital.

Navigating Tensions with Cultural Capital

Because of how schools are perceived and the way that schools recruit students who will reproduce the status quo, students are streamlined towards particular postsecondary pathways (Aries & Seider, 2007; Jaeger, 2009). Streamlining is not isolated to universities but can begin early in children's educational careers (Aries & Seider, 2007). The participants' experiences with unsupportive teachers and guidance counsellors in public education demonstrate how educational pathways can be determined by biases and stereotypes influenced by social expectations rather than academic ability, as the participants had the ability to attend university but were met with resistance when determining their own educational pathways. Often, the participants were expected to achieve a particular academic level and attend a particular postsecondary institution that was different than the expectation that they themselves held. If a student does not feel supported by those involved with her or his education, he or she may lose confidence pursuing desired educational paths (van de Werfhost & Luijkx, 2010). Social norms, therefore, extend into the classrooms as the cultural capital privileged by the education system infiltrates the classroom. Just as Bourdieu (1984) recognizes that the education system is part of a wider social system, school systems are

also part of the education systems. The daily occurrences within schools cannot be separated from the wider social context.

To navigate the cultural capital promoted by the education system, the participants had to recreate normative pathways. In facing tensions with various barriers, the participants worked to justify their educational decisions that may not have been necessary if they conformed to the expectations of their teachers, schools, and social structure. While Désert et al. (2009) highlight how detrimental stereotypes can be, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, Anna and Colleen refused to allow perceptions to determine their educational pathway. Both Anna and Colleen used their socioeconomic background as justification to do well academically and be the first in their family to attend university. Brooke also did not meet expectations through her own research to complete high school early. While her expectations may not be directly associated with her socioeconomic status, her access to economic capital did pose additional barriers in her pursuit to defy the education structure that limited her opportunity for academic success.

While research suggests that students whose cultural capital does not align with what is promoted at schools are at an academic disadvantage (Fukuyama, 2001; Yosso, 2009), the participants in this research use the cultural capital that they have to find alternate ways of being academically successful within the education system in order to attend univeristy. For the participants, to be successful academically means working within the system to succeed within it. As cited in Gonzalez's (2001) article, amongst a number of potential outcomes, students can become disconnected from schooling or can take action in response to the cultural capital privileged by the education system. Anna,

Brooke, and Colleen worked within the education system and found ways to be academically successful despite social expectations (Désert et al., 2009; Gofen, 2009).

Ongoing emotional parental support also accompanied the participants' own determination to pursue postsecondary education. Research highlights the importance of parental involvement in education often indicating that parents who lack privileged forms of cultural capital cannot offer as extensive academic support as parents from privileged backgrounds (Adamuti-Trache & Andres, 2008; Laureau & Horvat, 1999; Lee & Bowen, 2009; Monkman et al., 2009). The experiences of the participants support the literature outlining the importance of parental involvement, but do not necessarily support the connection between cultural capital and degree of parental involvement. Despite their lack of institutionalized educational cultural capital, the parents of the participants were all involved in their daughters' education. While the parents of the participants may not have had the same cultural capital that was promoted in the education system, they still helped their daughters to achieve their academic goals within the system. In doing so, parents, despite their capital, can prepare their children to successfully operate within the education system (Gofen, 2009). Support alone did not guarantee the academic success of the participants as their parents' support was also accompanied by the participants' determination, academic ability, and knowledge of the education system.

The amount of parental support the participants received from their parents was beneficial when facing challenges in accessing privileged cultural capital. As a result, parents can play "an important motivating role in their children's postsecondary participation" (Knighton, 2002, p. 25). The findings of this research, therefore, did not support literature that suggests that parents without post-secondary education cannot offer

sufficient academic support to their children (Knighton, 2002; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Despite not having attended post-secondary education, all of the participants described their parents as actively involved in choosing the school that they attended in providing the emotional support provided throughout educational experiences. Furthermore, as seen through Anna's and Colleen's appreciations for their academic opportunities and Brooke's frustration with privileged peers, the participants' upbringing and parental support has provided them with valuable family capital (Swartz, 2008) that is not always tied to social class position or economic capital. Their upbringing and life experiences have allowed them to see value in their educational opportunities as they do not take their education for granted in the same way as some of their privileged peers.

Social Belonging and Tensions with Cultural Capital

When particular representations of culture are privileged, those from cultural backgrounds that differ from the norm can experience feelings of marginalization (Reay, 2005). As a result, first-generation students often drop out of postsecondary education regardless of high academic achievement because they feel that they do not fit in with the social climate of the school (Lehmann, 2007). Because habitus is essentially how one interacts with and interprets the environment based on dispositions and lived experiences, it is often connected to feelings of belonging (Bourdieu, 1984; Lehmann, 2007). Exploring issues of belonging, the participants' discussions of fitting in socially are reflective of how social habitus and cultural capital interact with various social fields. All 3 participants discussed different instances of fitting in with the social environment of their schools. Struggles to fit in prompted Brooke to complete high school early and consider transferring universities, while the positive social environment of the university

was the primary reason that Colleen and Anna chose their postsecondary institution. Furthermore, feelings of belonging influenced attitudes towards educational experiences; if a social experience was negative at school the participant would not have a positive school experience.

Although the research highlights strong connections between feelings of belonging and school drop-out rates for first-generation university students (Aries & Seider, 2000; Cole & Omari, 2003; Lehmann, 2007), the participants in this study used their frustration with fitting in socially as motivation to excel academically. In doing so the participants actively redefine expectations commonly held for first-generation students and reposition themselves within the education system in an attempt to change the social issues that they confront. How the participants repositioned themselves was best shown through their encounters with opposition and how they found ways to success despite resistance. The effort to challenge the education system was a way for Brooke to finish school earlier than her peers. Unlike what has been shown through previous research, she did not compromise her own institutionalized cultural capital because she did not fit in.

The concern and struggle with fitting in socially demonstrates the participants' recognition of what is needed to belong. Anna clearly articulates what is commonly worn in university environments and admits that she dresses in a similar fashion. Similarly, Brooke expresses her frustration with the lack of critical inquiry that her university offers but still ascribes to the method encouraged by her professors in order to pass her courses. Furthermore, all 3 participants discuss the importance of maintaining a positive social image with their peers even if it means acting in ways that contradict how

they are really feeling. The participants are aware of their need to perform particular representations of cultural capital in order to be accepted and improve their educational experience. In being aware of what actions and representations are promoted and privileged in education, they are able to enact and utilize this capital.

Anna and Brooke's awareness of appearance and disposition when enacting and acquiring privileged forms of cultural capital within a professional field allowed them to make valuable social connections. Social capital allows participants access to social connections through which they can attain and utilize the cultural capital that is privileged within a particular field (Coleman, 1988). The participants outlined the importance of making strong social connections in order to best utilize their institutional capital as privileged cultural capital becomes more valuable if it is accompanied by social capital. Social capital is not equally accessible to everyone; like cultural capital, privileged forms of social capital are maintained within closed groups of privileged members of society (Lin, 2000). Because the participants have managed to work against the education system's expectations, learned the privileged cultural capital of the education system, and gained acceptance into postsecondary education, they have access to social capital that they likely would not have been able to access otherwise.

The participants' social experiences were often tied directly to educational experiences. Recognizing how social experiences and educational experiences intersect, the participants found it important to build strong social relationships in order to be successful at school and ultimately successful in the work force. "Social and cultural resources are therefore converted into educational advantages" (Lareau & Horvat, 1999,

p.37) through recognizing what is valued in particular fields and knowing when to act in ways that both challenge and adhere to social norms.

Recommendations for Future Research, Implications, and Conclusion

Given the nature of qualitative research, generalizations are not meant to be made from this research; however, it is still important to understand the conflicts that first-generation students can encounter when dealing with privileged forms of cultural capital in education. While this research outlined how the first-generation students perceived their own cultural capital, perceived the cultural capital of the education system, responded to privileged forms of cultural capital in education, and understood where they belonged socially in relation to privileged forms of cultural capital, it did so while being limited to the perspectives of the individual participants. Regardless of how important it is for educational life stories to remain in context, the intersections and differences between participants are important to take into account when understanding ways that the education system includes and excludes students according to cultural capital. While each participant expressed struggles within her specific educational context, collectively their experiences connected to issues that are embedded within the education system and ultimately society. While contexts do vary, and the valuing of capital is dependent on context, context is often influenced by wider social norms (Bourdieu, 1984). Norms are problematic because they are often accepted rather than challenged, which is why it is important for research to analyse a variety of perspectives on social norms in order to understand the issues related to how dominant culture is reproduced.

In analyzing the success of first-generation students despite educational obstacles, insight was given into how the participants viewed the ways in which the education

system can privilege dominant culture. It is important to recognize that these successful students were Caucasian, and aside from their economic capital and their parents' institutional capital, they adhered to the dominant culture. As a result, the participants may have been able to operate more easily within the system than someone who does not represent privileged social norms. While it is important to maintain the issues concerning the struggles that these participants did face, future research might include looking at students from more diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, because the participants are only in the first semester of their first year of university, it is uncertain whether or not they will actually complete university. While the participants intend to complete a postsecondary degree, it would be beneficial to use a longitudinal research design to see if the participants' perceptions change throughout their educational careers. Finally, given Dumais' (2001) suggestion that cultural capital plays a lesser role for boys than it does for girls, this research would benefit from including male experiences to further understand how cultural capital operates for students from a variety of backgrounds.

As a non-first-generation student, the forms of capital represented in my home have helped navigate educational and social tensions as the forms of cultural capital that positively influenced my class position often aligned with the forms of cultural capital privileged in the education system. Through the educational life stories of first-generation students, it is evident that the participants had different educational tensions related to their parents' institutional cultural capital. The participants were able to fit in to and sometimes challenge the dominant culture because of how they utilized their knowledge, possession, and representation of privileged cultural capital. Furthermore, the participants actively redefine expectations commonly held for first-generation students.

Bourdieu (1984) argues that cultural capital is inherent in education and restricts access to academic capital (academic achievement as a form of institutional capital) depending on the students' family and social origin:

> Through its value-inculcating and value-imposing operations, the school also helps (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the initial disposition, i.e., class of origin) to form a general, transposable disposition towards recognized knowledge and practices but tends to be applied beyond the bounds of the curriculum, taking the form of a "disinterested" propensity to accumulate experience and knowledge which may not be directly profitable in the academic market. (p. 23)

As shown through the participants' experiences confronting privileged forms of cultural capital, a student's academic success can be influenced by the cultural capital promoted within the education system. Feelings of belonging are an important part of academic success and because first-generation students often feel marginalized within the education system, those who do not identify with norms often disengage from the education system (Jehangir, 2010; Stieha, 2010).

Instead of disengaging from the education system, the participants overcame many obstacles such as biased teacher expectations, limited financial resources, restricting course streaming, and uncomfortable social environments in order to be academically successful. Many struggles that the participants dealt with were linked to capital and in many instances the participants were able to identify academically restricting power structures. The participants were academically successful despite the cultural capital promoted through their educational experiences because of their

understanding of privileged culture, their own hard work and determination, and their parents' support. It is important that although the participants were academically successful (in that they are attending university), tension and conflict were often described throughout their educational life stories.

Analyzing the educational struggles of first-generation students, Saunders and Serna (2004) argue that "success is influenced by the structure of the current system or environment in which they are embedded" (p.160). Using Bourdieu's (1984) theory of cultural reproduction in education allowed for a critical exploration of the power structures that may limit success of first-generation students. Through my own educational life story, I expressed the importance of "fitting in". I was encouraged to learn how to fit into a system and accept the values that were promoted. In learning how to "fit in," I also learned how to perform the mannerisms of a "good student," and I learned how to be academically successful. In doing so, I conformed to the cultural norms and values of the education system. After analyzing the educational life stories of my first-generation participants and their struggle to "fit in," I realized that the struggles that students face are not necessarily because they do not "fit into" the education system, but rather that the education system does not allow them to fit. The real issue lies within the education system, as instead of teaching students how to conform, it is important to restructure the education system to meet the needs of all students.

The educational life stories of the participants highlight a need to critically analyze the structure and functioning of the education system. While my research aimed to analyze the first-generation students' experiences with cultural capital within the education system, the educational life stories related educational tensions specifically to

classroom design, teacher practices, course design, social makeup, advertisement campaigns, disciplinary procedures, and academic expectations. Addressing cultural capital within the education system means addressing cultural capital within the various aspects of education. hooks (1996) argues that "to teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin" (p. 13). If educators want to create a learning environment that represents those who are traditionally marginalized, it is important to first understand the educational life stories of students. In doing so, educators can learn about the unquantifiable struggles that some first-generation students face and realize how power can influence various aspects of the education system. To further address issues of cultural capital and marginalization that first-generation students experience, Jehangir (2010) suggests that educators should "draw on [students'] cultural capital, bring their stories and lived experiences into the learning process, and allow them to voice and author their selves" (p. 549). In accommodating students' voices into educational practices and allowing students to have authority over how they are perceived, educators may be able to create a space where traditionally marginalized students are represented.

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Appendix A

Brock University Research Ethics Board Clearance Letter

Brock University
Research Ethics Board
Tel: 905 688-5550 ext. 3035
Email: reb@brocku.ca

Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research

DATE: 10/22/2010

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: TABER, Nancy - Education

FILE: 10-067 - TABER

TYPE: Masters Thesis/Project STUDENT: Laura Lane
SUPERVISOR: Nancy Taber

TITLE: Experiences with cultural capital in education: Exploring the life histories of first generation post secondary students

ETHICS CLEARANCE GRANTED

Type of Clearance: NEW Expiry Date: 10/31/2011

The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research proposal and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement. Clearance granted from **10/22/2010 to 10/31/2011**.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, an annual report. Should your project extend beyond the expiry date, you are required to submit a Renewal form before **10/31/2011**. Continued clearance is contingent on timely submission of reports.

To comply with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, you must also submit a final report upon completion of your project. All report forms can be found on the Research Ethics web page.

In addition, throughout your research, you must report promptly to the REB:

a) Changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
b) All adverse and/or unanticipated experiences or events that may have real or potential unfavourable implications for participants;
c) New information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study;
d) Any changes in your source of funding or new funding to a previously unfunded project.

We wish you success with your research.

Approved:

Jan Frijters, Acting Chair
Research Ethics Board (REB)

Note: Brock University is accountable for the research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its auspices and may refuse certain research even though the REB has found it ethically acceptable.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of research at that site.

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Experiences with cultural capital in education: Exploring the life histories of first-generation post secondary students
Interview Guide

When conducting life history research, it is important to recognize that most life history methodologies tend to "favour conducting open and in-depth interviews in a highly active and interactive fashion using only the most general of guides in order to help the subject construct a sense of their cultural world" (Plummer, 2001, p. 140). While a guideline is necessary to structure the interview, it is also necessary to maintain a natural flow in the interview. As a result, I plan on covering the following questions; however, it may not be necessary to ask every question as material may be covered indirectly through the responses that come from other broader questions. During the first interview broad questions will be asked to provide a basic structure of the life history. The information discussed in the first interview will help determine the questions that will be asked during the second interview.

Interview Questions

First interview questions:

- Describe your life history. Begin wherever you like and include whatever you wish.
- How would you describe yourself when you were younger (as a child, as an adolescent)? How would you describe yourself now? Have you changed much over the years? How?
- Describe your home life. Where did you grow up? What was/were your neighbourhood(s) like? Describe your living accommodation(s) growing up. How did you find the environment?
- Describe your elementary and secondary school life. Where were schools in relation to your home? What was the neighbourhood like? How did you find the environment?
- Describe your university life. What are your living accommodations like? How do you find the environment? How do you feel about university life?
- Think of your life as if it were a book where each part of your life composes a chapter in the book. Divide your life into its major chapters and briefly describe each chapter. You may have as many or as few chapters as you like but I would suggest at least two or three and at most seven or eight.

Second interview:

- What is a typical day like for you?
- Describe your relationships with your family, friends, neighbours, and/or colleagues before and after you began university.
- Why did you decide to attend university?
- What would you consider to be the most significant experiences that you have had at university so far? How have they affected you educationally and personally?
- What are your favourite qualities about yourself? What are your strongest qualities as a student?
- What qualities do you think an ideal student should have? What qualities do you think universities want an ideal student to have?
- What are your goals for the future?
- If you had themes for work, love, and play, what would they be?